













OSCAR WILDE

## BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

SONNETS FROM A PARISIAN BALCONY.

THE LIONESS OF MAYFAIR.

THE DOCTOR WIFE (TRANSLATION).

LADY LILIAN'S LUCK.

WAS IT A SIN? (A SON OF AFRICA).

MRS. EVELYN'S HUSBANDS.

DAUGHTERS OF PLEASURE.

THE RAGGED EDGE (EARLY TALES OF THE  
RAND).

THE GENTLEMAN DIGGER. (FIRST NOVEL  
WRITTEN OF JOHANNESBURG.)

GREAT COMPOSERS.

GREAT SINGERS.

GREAT VIRTUOSI.

SONNETS AND LOVE POEMS.

SONNETS OF FELICITATION (ON THE MARRIAGE  
OF QUEEN MARY AND KING GEORGE V.)

CORONATION ODE TO KING EDWARD VII.





**Portrait of Oscar Wilde, from an original pencil  
drawing by an American Artist.**

OSCAR WILDE  
AND  
HIS MOTHER

A MEMOIR

BY  
ANNA, COMTESSE DE BRÉMONT

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1911.



TO  
THE NOBLE SOUL OF  
"SPERANZA"  
LADY WILDE  
THE MOTHER OF OSCAR WILDE  
IN  
REMEMBRANCE  
OF HER BEAUTIFUL  
FRIENDSHIP  
FOR  
THE AUTHOR.



## SONNET

OSCAR WILDE

### HIS BODY.

Into the ocean of Life was I thrown  
A rudderless barque of frail flesh and bone  
To sink in life's billow, or ride life's crest.  
A mariner bound on an unknown quest.  
And I dipped my sail in the blood-red wine  
Of the fruit from passion and pleasure's  
vine.  
The incense of life on my lips I burned,  
Till its sweetness to bitter ashes turned.

### HIS SOUL.

Out of the depths of the Infinite Past,  
Into the bondage of soul was I cast.  
Out of the depths thro' the merciless  
throes  
Of sin and repentance I purged my woes.  
Out of the depths to the uttermost height  
Of God's forgiveness—Fame's purified  
light !

ANNA DE BRÉMONT.

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# OSCAR WILDE

## BOOK I

### I

" *A great artist invents a type,*" wrote Oscar Wilde in his masterly essay on "The Decay of Lying." He proved his theory by inventing a type of which he was a startling representative ; a protean type of such power in the realm of literature, that few have equalled him in these days when literature has become a trade, instead of the glorious profession it once was.

Of Oscar Wilde's pose and personality much has been written. But, among those whose favoured mission it is to paint immortal pen-portraits from the fascinating palette of written words, none have solved the enigma of this mysterious and perplexing genius of letters. While giving a curious and censorious world alluring pictures of him, that at once attract and repel, they have fallen far short of the real solution of a fame built on paradox.



The failure of these artists of the pen is due to the fact that they have sought to depict the material, visible aspect of Oscar Wilde, his attitudes, his words, his faults and his eccentricities, without probing deeper for the invisible mainspring of which these qualities, acts, and conditions were but the illusions, that veiled, distorted and disguised the light of his soul.

Perhaps the blame is not entirely due to the obtuseness of these friendly, or unfriendly critics, but to Oscar Wilde himself, who sacrificed his soul to his personality. And, this is easy to understand, when we consider that thought is the language of the soul, and speech, the language of the brain, that each acts independently of the other and thereby forms the seemingly paradoxical combination of saying one thing while thinking another.

Oscar Wilde grasped this problem with all the tenacity of genius and expounded it, even while realising the peril that accompanied it, when he put into the mouth of Vivian, in "The Decay of Lying" those significant words:—" *Paradoxes are always dangerous things* "—words no doubt lightly written at the time, yet, inspired by the deep sub-consciousness of the future wherein he would reap in paradox

that which he had sown in paradox, through the immortal fame that he would achieve by mortal infamy.

It is to the soul of Oscar Wilde that we must look for the solution of his paradoxical personality and genius.

When the soul and the brain are united in a natural combination we behold the normal condition of the ordinary man and woman. When the union of soul and brain is abnormal, the result is the genius. This phenomenon is due to the hybrid state wherein the soul and brain are bound in sexual antithesis. The feminine soul in the masculine brain-building creates the genius of man—while the masculine soul in the feminine brain-building creates the genius of woman. Therefore, to the soul in the wrong brain-building is due all that is great in art and wonderful in the world's progress.

Oscar Wilde possessed the feminine soul. This was the ghost that haunted his house of life, that sat beside him at the feast and sustained him in the day of famine: the secret influence that weighted down his manhood and enervated his hope: the knowledge that he possessed the feminine soul; that he was a slave to the capricious, critical feminine

temperament, the feminine vanity and feminine weakness to temptation ; the feminine instinct of adaptability, the feminine impulse of the wanton's soul, gave him the lust for strange, forbidden pleasures, and imparted to his final repentance the sublime abnegation of the Magdalene.

And yet that same feminine soul endowed him with the supreme love and appreciation of beauty in every form, the music of words, the subtle harmonies of colour, imagery in language, the coquetry of thought that veiled itself in paradoxes and the fine and delicate vision that created in him the instinct of the poet : the keen sense of feminine intuition in the analysis of character that made him the wit and dramatist of his day, and the feminine quality of vanity and appetite for flattery and praise that made him the first dandy of his time.

His secret antipathy to woman as woman, and his open admiration for man as man, was a further proof of his feminine soul. He has said :—

*“ The woman that would hold a man must appeal to the worst in him.”*

But there were two women that he did not include in this sweeping assertion, the one was his mother, and the other his wife, both women that he well

knew appealed to the best in his protean nature. He, himself, would have been a good and noble woman had his feminine soul been in its right place ; in feminine brain-building. He was doomed before his birth, hence the strange maternal spirit of divination that urged his mother to wish that the child she was about to bring to the world would be a girl. The mother instinct sensed the feminine soul that had taken form within her.

The mothers of great men have possessed the masculine soul. The mother of Napoleon was a masculine woman who adopted male attire and rode to the war in company with her husband, and some historians claim that Napoleon was born in camp. At all events she ruled her family, including her famous son, Napoleon Bonaparte, with a firm, masculine hand. Lady Wilde had likewise the masculine courage of her political views. Her manifesto in the "NATION" roused all Ireland by its daring eloquence. She braved imprisonment during the trial of the editor of the "NATION" when she proclaimed herself the author of the seditious article in those famous words :—

"I am the culprit."

She saved the editor, but not the cause of her

beloved Ireland. If we glance back through history, by the vista of tradition, we behold the masculine-souled woman marking every age by some heroic deed, until we come to Mother Eve herself, braving the tempter and courageously shielding the father of our race from the vengeance of the Almighty.

A few years ago a German philosopher wrote a startling work in which he endeavoured to prove that woman had no soul. The problem *proved* too much for him—it drove him to madness : he died young, destroyed by his own hand, but his work lives as one of the monstrosities of literature.

It cannot be denied that the woman-genius under the sway of the masculine soul has never attained the height of perfection in art and science to which the man-genius has risen. The reason for this is found in the union of the higher feminine soul with the superior masculine brain-building. The feminine soul is sustained by the strength and virility of the masculine brain. The feminine soul is the essence of inspiration of imagination ; while the masculine brain is creative, self-posed and enduring, capable of unlimited effort, untrammelled by the natural crisis that pertains to the feminine brain-

building. The woman-genius has succeeded best in the arts of literature and the drama. Perhaps this is due to the essentially imaginative character of both arts. The masculine soul being hampered by the weakness and delicacy of the feminine brain-building finds its best expression in the imaginative and imitative field, while at the same time it renders her intrepid and fearless in action, because she possesses just enough of the masculine element of thought to enable her to become a leader among her sex. And yet she fails just at the point when she might reach the summit of fame as poet, painter and composer. This is due to her lack of boldness of execution, and fear of originality, ages of self-restraint and masculine domination having stunted her feminine brain-building and limited her powers of brain conception, hence the lack of great poets, painters and composers among women, though in the purely imitative arts of the actress and musical performer she often equals the masculine exponent in both. Woman follows readily a great ideal, although she never creates one.

And, after all, what is genius? This is a query that genius alone can answer, for it is only genius that can comprehend genius. Some claim, like

Balzac, that genius is only hard work—others declare it is that illusive quality called inspiration. And still others hold that it is only another name for opportunity. Again it has been called luck and even styled madness, but the fact is the genius is the creator of these conditions and qualities, while perfectly independent of each.

Genius is the electricity of thought engendered by the conflict between the soul and the brain, just as the visible electricity of nature is born of the clashing of opposite poles. Genius is the result of the soul's antagonism for the wrong brain-building. It is the soul's expression of revolt against the wanton freak of malicious nature that would bind it in a strange prison-house. It is not a fortunate or happy state of the soul, hence the sufferings and sadness of genius, its madness and excesses. And yet the great multitude of ordinary mankind, that is sane and healthy-minded through the conjunction of each individual soul in its proper brain-house, is jealous of the brilliant abnormal creature of genius evolved from some erratic whim of nature.

The world secretly despises genius, although the world desires to be amused at the expense of genius—whom it forces to dance to the tune of its caprice.

Thus from the sadness of genius springs the joyousness of life. To the dreamers the world owes a debt that only eternity can cancel. The genius of science has made the progress of the world. The genius of exploration has enlarged the world. The genius of music and poetry has refined and amused the world. The genius of literature has taught the world knowledge. The genius of painting and sculpture has held up the mirror wherein the world has seen its beauties reflected. All have been poorly repaid, and none more poorly than the poet. All have died poor in that which the world values and none poorer than the poet, while the unfortunate weavers of wit and spinners of fiction have toiled by day and burned the midnight oil to entertain the public and enrich the publisher.

There is nothing so weak and, at the same time, so powerful as genius. Nothing so helpless and yet helpful as genius. Nothing more selfish and less selfish than genius.

This outpouring of treasures that gold can buy, yet never create, is due to the suffering of the soul doomed to dwell in the wrong brain-building, the sorrow of the soul that seeks relief from itself in the excesses of thought that breed the delirium of genius.



But the soul is never so desperate in its revolt as when it assumes the protean mantle of the poet. The feminine soul of Oscar Wilde found its highest expression in the poet. The world—and the publishers—turned a deaf ear when he sang in verse. From disappointed hope and wounded vanity arose the feminine ingenuity that inspired him to capture public attention by assuming a pose, an attitude not displeasing, as it afforded him the opportunity of indulging his feminine love of beauty. He became the apostle of æsthetics, and the society he courted gave him the benefit of its sneers and good-natured ridicule. He suffered, but he had gained his point, and the name of Oscar Wilde was no longer unknown, but heralded as the synonym for a cult, an artistic extravaganza, a literary mountebank of the lecture platform ; an object of curiosity and newspaper chaff. It was a daring test, and it cut his pride and genius like the lash of a whip. But he accomplished his ends and leapt into notoriety at the first bound under that self-inflicted torture. A publisher was speedily found for the rejected book of poems, and wishing to benefit by the sudden and extraordinary success of his pose as the sunflower-decked champion of æstheticism he as

speedily secured a prominent manager and impresario to arrange a lecture tour that would prove a triumphal demonstration of his peculiar cult of beauty. America offered a fascinating field of possibility in the cause to which he was devoted. He would go to America and teach that delightful young nation, eager for progress and knowledge, the true cult of beauty, train the wide-awake eyes of the sons and daughters of "Uncle Sam" to new and wonderful vistas of art decoration ; instruct them in the noble art of how properly to clothe themselves and give them an example of that decadent art in his own person.

## II

IN the spring of 1882, when Oscar Wilde made his first public appearance in New York, on the platform of Chickering Hall, to discourse on the English Renaissance, I was unable to accept the invitation extended me, owing to a sad bereavement—tragically sudden—that occurred in my family. It was in the autumn of the same year that I first met Oscar Wilde. The occasion was peculiarly propitious. It was at a dinner party, given in honour of the apostle of æsthetics by an old friend, and former pupil, of Sir William Wilde, at his mansion in the neighbourhood of Madison Square. About twenty guests sat down at the great round table in the handsome dining-room, full of the mysterious glow of softly subdued lights and fragrant with the perfume of costly flowers, where the mirrors at either end of the room reflected the sumptuous table covered with a cloth of white satin, over which were thickly strewn loose red roses. White tall crystal vases supported exquisite white

lilies : the display of the famous sunflower being a privilege accorded only to Oscar Wilde as the guest of honour.

The company was entirely composed of ladies well-known for their beauty and wit in the society of Boston and New York ; many had donned æsthetic robes of charming design that were evidently a delight to the eye of Oscar Wilde, for his glance roamed from one to the other of his fair followers with increasing pleasure in his smile of approval.

He was himself, naturally, the centre of attraction at that very æsthetic dinner. His splendid youth and manly bearing lent a certain charm to the strange costume in which he masqueraded. He shone to far greater and better advantage amid these surroundings than he did on the lecture platform. There was a dignity and graciousness in his manner that blinded one to his eccentric appearance. The long locks of rich brown hair that waved across his forehead and undulated to his shoulders gave his fine head an almost feminine beauty. It might have been the head of a splendid girl, were it not for the muscular white throat, fully displayed by the rolling collar and fantastic green silk necktie, knotted after the fashion of an étudiant

of the Parisian studios, the broad, somewhat heavy shoulders encased in the well-fitting velvet coat with its broad lapels, the left of which bore the ubiquitous emblem, a huge and magnificent specimen of the sunflower. He sat, or rather posed, in a large, high-backed, carved chair, while, directly opposite to him, the host occupied a chair of more modest dimensions. The two prettiest women of the company were seated on the right and left of the guest of honour. One was a celebrated amateur actress and the other the daughter of one of New York's well-known millionaires, noted as much for her beauty as her wit. One of these favoured women wore an æsthetic costume of pale green satin, relieved by chains of shimmering pearls, while the other was really dazzling in a gown of yellow velvet, also of æsthetic design, with a massive necklace of topaz set in diamonds and a Greek coiffure bound with bands of topaz and diamonds. Of the other costumes I have no recollection, save that I was the only sombre note in that brilliant circle in my black evening gown and ornaments of black garnets. I sat on the left of the host, and being the youngest present, I was somewhat timid, and content to "hear, see and say nothing," like a child, although

my impressions were far from those of a child.

I remember that I was at a loss to decide whether I was amused or edified by the spectacle of that resplendent personage clad in black velvet coat and knee breeches, black silk stockings, low shoes with glittering buckles ; while the gorgeous sunflower fascinated me to an embarrassing degree. Had I not known the fame of the wearer of that bizarre costume for wit and artistic genius I could have fancied I was in the midst of a party of merry masqueraders, gathered round a mediæval banquet presided over by a disguised mummer.

Nevertheless, we had assembled with all seriousness to do honour to Oscar Wilde. The dinner was one of many given him at that time by Boston and New York society as a protest to the attitude of misrepresentation and ridicule assumed by the Press. Boston had taken the lead in his defence through Mrs. Julia Ward Howe. The example of this distinguished American woman was speedily followed by the literary society of New York, a most exclusive set to which at that time brains, not money, constituted the " open sesame."

The insidious attack of one scribe, whose social position commanded attention was ably refuted by

the brave response of Mrs. Julia Ward Howe, while Oscar's social defence in New York was undertaken by many noted members of society, not always through the medium of the pen as in the case of Mrs. Howe and her distinguished poet-confrère, Joaquin Miller, but by the subtler means of courteous hospitality.

As a friend and pupil of Oscar Wilde's father, Sir William Wilde, our host was one of the foremost in the matter of Oscar's social defence. The occasion of which I write was in itself a significant rebuff to the slanders spread by the scribe already mentioned, in that it was a gathering composed entirely of ladies, the most prominent of New York's society and literary women. That we were filled with an amiable curiosity to meet the eccentric hero of the hour goes without saying, and, at the same time, we were moved to show all possible respect and admiration to the young apostle of æsthetics who had won the regard of some of our representative Americans, among whom were General Grant, Henry Ward Beecher, Oliver Wendell Holmes, General and Mrs. McClellan, Louisa Alcott and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and, last though not least, the veteran poet of the Sierras, the sweet songster of the

mountain woodlands of California, Joaquin Miller.

I was filled with a naive curiosity to behold the object of the numerous poster-caricatures that placarded and were paraded through the streets of New York or flaunted their innuendoes in the pages of Puck on the first appearance of Oscar Wilde.

But my surprise did not exceed that of the rich young American girl, making her court début in London, who on a notable occasion, seeing an exalted personage for the first time, naively exclaimed :

“ Look, Mommer, he wears a garter round his neck ! ”

I was prepared to see Oscar Wilde in all the glory of his famous costume, but I was not simple enough to mistake the proper signification of that exotic garb and decoration. I divined at once that it was a pose by which he concealed his real personality, a pose to divert attention from his purpose, and at the same time attract attention to his object, which was to amuse, in order the better to teach his gospel of art. While I listened and observed, the consistency of his pose gradually convinced me of the wisdom of it. For is not the public invariably caught and held by a pose ? I recalled another great poseur, a celebrated preacher in whose church



choir I had been contralto soloist before my marriage—the late Henry Ward Beecher. His eloquence attracted an audience of thousands to Plymouth Church every Sunday, a vast concourse, drawn thither more by his personality as a dramatic and impressive orator than by his fame as a minister of the gospel. Mr. Beecher upheld the traditions of his family as a humanitarian whose religious views were broad and liberal. His sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, set the torch to the war brand that destroyed slavery in America, by her novel “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” It was but natural that to her brother, the difficult mission of winning over the sympathies of the English people in favour of the North should have been entrusted. Mr. Beecher was never more eloquent and impressive than when describing his experiences on that momentous tour through England. He possessed a quality of dry humour that excited the risibility of his audience while leaving him apparently unconscious of the effect he produced. That was the most potent of his many poses. He had a subtle faculty for wittily illustrating his doctrine on religion by the most seemingly opposite similes. He held his congregation breathless with emotion, and then turned their tears into

laughter, or roused them to unbounded enthusiasm. I have heard him say that, when he went to preach the cause of the American war of emancipation to the English and win their sympathies from the South, he first put his audience into a thoroughly good humour by telling them a witty anecdote or assuming a comic pose, and that when their mouths were wide open with laughter he threw the pill he wished to administer to them straight down their throats. In this way he forced his audience to listen, and, willy nilly, swallow the truths he had come to tell them.

I, who had assisted for two years at the services of Mr. Beecher, was able to divine the pose of Oscar Wilde. He, also, sought first to amuse and then instruct his listeners in his peculiar doctrines on art. But they would not swallow the pill, and why? Because Oscar Wilde was not in earnest, while Henry Ward Beecher had all the force of a serious conviction of the truth of what he said. I felt that night, as I watched and listened, that Oscar Wilde would have been as handsome, if not more handsome and manly, if he had worn ordinary evening dress. His youth and grace would have been emphasized by the assistance of the tailor's skill.

Why, then, I ask myself, does he masquerade in that girlish coiffure and the sunflower corsage bouquet setting off his décolleté collar ?

I was filled by a feeling of pity for the weakness that prompted him to approach perilously near the ludicrous. I was young, and endowed with too much of the serious spirit of youth to add my share to the admiration I could not feel.

I was not yet blasé with the fashionable experiences of freak entertainments, and could find no amusement in the eccentricity of our guest of honour. Although his voice and his wit charmed and exhilarated me, I felt a keen disapproval of the bizarre inconsistency between the man and his attitude.

It may have been my silence and air of aloofness, or my sombre gown,—I never discovered which, in the after years when I knew him well enough to ask the question—that finally drew his attention to me. Our eyes met across the expanse of that rose-decked table. He ceased speaking for an instant and gazed steadily towards me. I could distinctly see the colour of his eyes. They were a pale blue with golden flecks around the iris, that changed strangely until the light within them

seemed to turn to green, like the glow in the eyes of an animal at bay. The metaphor may seem exaggerated, but not when we consider that he was secretly at bay—fighting that proud vanity of the feminine soul within his masculine brain-house, while all his manhood suffered through the feminine rôle he was playing.

In his glance, as deep as it was brief, I read his secret. I saw his feminine soul (as we sometimes see the souls of those around us) revealed in the mirror of those strange eyes. I beheld his feminine soul, a suffering prisoner in the wrong brain-house. There was a mingled defiance and resentment in his glance. It seemed to question the presence of a critical element in that company of his admirers ; then, the glance softened into an appeal that touched me infinitely, for it unconsciously revealed to me the burden of his secret. He evidently felt reassured by the sympathy in my eyes, as he abruptly resumed the subject upon which he had been speaking, and, with a return of that frivolous pose, he raised one of the roses lying on the table beside him, and pressed it to his lips, as he said dreamily, as though in answer to my thought :—

“ What is the soul ? It is the essence of perfect

beauty. I would inhale the soul of beauty as I do the fragrance of this perfect rose—and die upon it if need be ! ”

A murmur of admiration floated round the table, as his melodious voice chanted this significant phrase. My attention was rivetted by that coincidence of our thoughts on the soul. I have never forgotten those words.

“ The soul of woman is beauty,” he continued, “ as the soul of man is strength. If the two could be combined in the one being we should have the perfection sought by art since art began. But art cannot create a real rose though it can improve it.”

He smiled upon the company, and assumed a Bunthornian pose, a pose decidedly more graceful and fascinating than ever the puppet of Gilbert’s wit-creation could assume. He was the real Bunthorne amid a bevy of real beauties. Then he donned his cap and bells, played at being the Society jester, held up his mirror for our entertainment, and let us see therein reflected something of ourselves. But he had the good taste not to be personal, while he avoided platitudes.

“ America is a wonderful country and the most

wonderful thing in America is the American woman ! ”

A burst of subdued applause followed this sweeping tribute.

“ The American woman,” he continued, “ is the most decorated and decorative object that I have seen in America.”

“ America reminds me of one of Edgar Allan Poe’s exquisite poems, because it is full of belles ! ”

We were duly impressed by the wit of this happy compliment, and one of our number enthusiastically cried :—

“ Behold the tribute of the belles ! ” as she caught up the roses lying on the table before her and cast them towards him. The others round the table quickly followed her example. Roses rained upon him from every side. And I am sure there was not a thorn in all that shower of roses to judge from the smile that illumined his face as he bowed under our fragrant ovation.

\* That was the finishing touch to that unforgettable dinner, and I will supplement my account of it with just a few words to prove that the impression which Oscar Wilde made on the taste of the American in the matter of home decoration, was a lasting one.

To-day, the horse-hair covered furniture, the ugly wall-paper and coarse stone-ware china, the decorative fly-papers, the glaringly defective house architecture with its ungainly lines and grotesque angles, has disappeared. The useful is combined with the beautiful. Every home is a picture in itself. This is what Oscar Wilde did for the great mass of the people—the artisans, the mechanics and even the labourers. His propaganda of art was not lost, for his very eccentricities, his abuse and ridicule by the Press, spread the gospel among the people. The homely humble housewife was his faithful disciple. And, therefore, his work and his suffering were not in vain.

### III

THE fabric of life is formed of multitudinous threads that Fate weaves into bright or sombre designs. Fate misses a stitch, or drops a thread, now and then, and the texture alters its pattern.

Fate silently dropped a thread in my life, that night of my first meeting with Oscar Wilde, and then as silently caught up the thread four years later, to weave it into the vision of the pen, that was to adorn and gladden my future ; enrich me far more than the tinsel thread of fortune could ever have done. I was to enter into full possession of my soul and receive the gift of expression through my meeting with the mother of Oscar Wilde.

During that interval of years I had not forgotten the impression borne in upon my soul by the soul of Oscar Wilde. Neither was I permitted to forget the personality of the man, although I never expected to see him again ; and much less that the thread of our meeting should again be woven into my life and completely alter its design. The production of his play "VERA, OR THE NIHILISTS"



revived my interest in him. I attended the *première* at the Union Square Theatre in New York on the evening of August 20th 1883. It was an unfortunate date, as August is the off-season and the society folk that would have supported the run of the play were absent at the numerous watering places, or abroad. The consequence was that poor houses greeted the new author and his play, although the first night was sufficiently filled to welcome his work. The piece hung fire for the reason that the first performance was witnessed by a gathering of professionals, composed of actors who thronged the Rialto, as Union Square was dubbed, waiting for the usual autumn formation of touring companies; actors engaged in the rehearsals held daily by the more fortunate companies already booked for long tours, and actresses starring in "one-night-stand" combinations; journalists looking for spicy copy, and odds and ends of summer visitors to the great metropolis.

It was not an intellectual audience, and what capacity it possessed for enjoyment melted under the stress of the heat, in the stifling atmosphere of a crowded theatre on one of the hottest nights of August. Another vital drawback was the absence

of the stock Company of the Union Square Theatre, owing to the summer closing of the regular season. It was quite out of the order of things to sub-let the theatre for fugitive performances; the audience tacitly resented the absence of the company of trained and polished actors and actresses. One thought of the delightful leading lady, Miss Rose Etying, the handsome and debonnaire Mr. Charles Thorne or Richard Mansfield, just then rising into fame, and missed the perfect stage-craft and management that would have ensured to "VERA" a brilliant success. It was like going to a performance at the *Théâtre Français*, minus its matchless company of players. Therefore, Oscar Wilde's play had not a fair chance, despite the fact that it was superbly mounted and the part of Vera admirably portrayed by Miss Marie Prescott. Or it may have been due to there being only one female character in the play, a very serious defect in the eyes of the American public, who favour the actress more than the actor, and like a good seasoning of the feminine element in their theatrical sauce. At all events the play proved a summer bubble that burst after floating a week in the uncongenial atmosphere of Union Square. It was a bitter disappointment to

Oscar Wilde, and to those of his friends who had taken the trouble to forego the delights of their seaside cottages and brave the torrid heat of an August night to assist at his success. The Press condemned the Play wholesale. There was the trail of the æsthetic prejudice in most of the criticisms, and unvarnished spite and ridicule in the remainder. It gave the impression of a combined boycott and was certainly no credit to the justice or veracity of the New York papers, but then it was the Summer Season, and the real critics, like the society folk, were no doubt away enjoying the sea breezes of Long Branch, or perhaps, nearer still, bathing and eating soft shell crabs at Coney Island. My friend, the host of that memorable dinner, was particularly wroth over the treatment Oscar Wilde received from the press and the public. After that unfortunate episode the author and his play were soon forgotten. With me, however, it left a lingering impression of regret.

At that period my life was full of the unexpected. I was under the sway of that mysterious impulse styled by the Germans *Wanderlust*. I sought in change and travel distraction from the perpetual grief due to my bereavement ; and when, a year or

two later, a dear sister residing in London urged me to come to England for a three months' visit, I was delighted at the prospect held forth, and not the least of that pleasure was the hope of meeting Lady Wilde, whose praises my old friend was never weary of singing. Therefore when I sailed from New York on the *City of Berlin* that stormy morning of March 13th 1886, I was happy in the possession of a letter of introduction from my old friend to Lady Wilde. I set out, like Columbus, with the joyous prospect of finding a new world in that old world across the seas ; and I was not, like Oscar Wilde, disappointed with the Atlantic Ocean. Every hour of that tempestuous voyage was a source of delightful excitement, a revelation of my inborn love for the grandeur of the wide waste of waters that the hurricane of winds and mad frolic of the stormy waves could not appal. I felt the fearless spirit of my Norse ancestors stir within me ; no, I was not disappointed with the Atlantic, and I must confess to a feeling of regret when the shores of England brought that unforgettable voyage to an end.

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About a month after my arrival in London I

received the expected invitation to call on Lady Wilde in a genial little note explaining her delay. She wrote that, being in a state of transition, everything was upside down in her home, as she was removing shortly to another house, but would I waive ceremony and come the following Sunday and have tea with her? Needless to relate that I was at once flattered and nervous over her note and the prospect of meeting a woman of such literary distinction, and at the same time curious to see the mother of the man who had interested me so strangely and to whom I was so strangely antagonistic. Lady Wilde and her son Willie were then living in Park Street, Mayfair, as the cards sent me, on my arrival, announced. At that period Park Street was as smart as Park Lane, but that was before the advent of the South African millionaires had imparted the glamour of gold to the name of Park Lane.

## IV

It was before an ancient dwelling that my hansom set me down. I remember I was somewhat surprised and disappointed by the unassuming appearance of the residence of Lady Wilde. I had been accustomed to the brown stone mansions and marble palaces of our moneyed aristocrats of New York, and could scarcely credit the fact that a woman of Lady Wilde's distinction should be so simply housed. That was the first of the many disillusionments that I was to experience in romantic old London and its unromantic society. It was with some misgiving that I raised the rusty knocker on the door. The closed windows seemed a silent warning that I should find nobody at home. My fears were unnecessary, however, for the door opened with alacrity to my timid knock, and gave me an uneasy suspicion that my arrival had been observed. A servant, whose age would have been difficult to surmise, bade me enter with an accent that made up for the difficulty about her age—there was no mistaking that delicious fresh brogue united to a

friendly and ingratiating manner that, somehow, sent all my misgivings flying.

"Come in, Acushla, sure her ladyship's expecting ye this whole blessed afternoon!" she said, from the nebulous obscurity of the gloom of the hall behind her, while my eyes still full of the sunshine could discern nothing beyond her wan face and uncouth figure.

"Mind the step!" she cried, grasping my hand to lead me. "Shure, it's her ladyship that loves to turn daylight into candlelight."

For the moment I could not comprehend this ambiguous reference to the taste of her mistress, but when she had guided me skilfully through the long dark hall and round an angle and opened the door of a large low-ceiled panelled room dimly illumined by red-shaded candles, I understood her quaint wit.

"Shure, here she is, my lady, the American Countess herself!"

I should have been amused over her original and unceremonious announcement, had not the majestic figure standing in the centre of the obscurity given me a sense of awe. I remained motionless, not daring to take a step forward until my eyes had grown

accustomed to the subdued light. I had the curious sensation of one crossing a bridge in the dark. I have often recalled that prophetic sensation, for my entrance into that dim old room marked a great change in my life. I left my girlhood's years of pleasure and sorrow behind me and crossed the bridge that led to the joys and consolations of intellectual life, guided by the influence of that remarkable woman awaiting me amid the shadows of her broken hopes, the woman who was to teach me out of her own intellectual struggles and failures the secret of success.

Lady Wilde greeted me with warm words of welcome in the rich, vibrating voice that was one of her greatest fascinations. As she held my hand in both of hers and drew me nearer the candles burning on the chimney-piece to take a good look at me, I saw her noble face more clearly. I was infinitely moved by the pathetic expression of her large, lustrous eyes, and the evidences of womanly coquetry in the arrangement of her hair and those little aids to cheat time and retain a fading beauty. Yet, age could not deprive the brow, nose and chin of their classic lines, and in that gracious smile there was still the eternal sweetness of youth. A woman's smile



never grows old for it is the reflection of her soul.

There was a moment of silence between us during that mutual scrutiny. Then I saw more clearly as when thought meets thought, and read the power behind those lustrous eyes and the brave spirit under that fading mask of beauty. But above all, I felt the poet's soul that reigned there. Something of this must have revealed itself in my regard—the admiration, the reverence that I felt—for her eyes grew tender with a mist of tears—poor, dear, noble spirit! My eyes are misty after all the years as I write of that moment, and I can hear again her wonderful voice, softened by emotion, saying all sorts of kind flattering words that were not insincere to me, for were we not both Irish? She by right of blood and birth and I by right of blood alone, both therefore understanding the language of sentiment as only the Irish understand! What mattered the old-fashioned purple brocade gown, the towering headdress of velvet, the long gold earrings, or the yellow lace fichu crossed on her breast and fastened with innumerable enormous brooches—the huge bracelets of turquoise and gold, the rings on every finger! Her faded splendour was more striking than the most fashionable attire,

for she wore that ancient finery with a grace and dignity that robbed it of its grotesqueness.

She posed in that dim dingy room like the *grande dame* that she was by right of intellect—nay genius and noble Irish blood. Never before, nor since, have I met a woman who was so absolutely sure of herself and of what she was. I felt an absorbing respect for her courage in being herself. I infinitely preferred her antiquated dress to the attempts of those women of literary pretensions and undecided age, who deck themselves out in cheap and gaudy up-to-date fineries, set off by wigs that change colour like the seasons, whom one meets in London society.

Lady Wilde made her surroundings subservient to her personality. That was the charm of her pose. She appeared absolutely unconscious of the incongruities around her—the dowdy maid, the poorly furnished room, the badly served tea, the dust and dinginess, the flickering candles, all were evidently matters of small importance in the light of her majestic presence and brilliant conversation. I divined whence her son Oscar had acquired his love of posing, but he possessed it with a difference and that very difference was perhaps the failure

of his pose. He did not take that pose seriously, but made his æsthetic attitude the means to an end, whereas Lady Wilde was intensely earnest in her pose ; she was not ashamed of her poverty but rather gloried in the contrast that it afforded to her personality and brilliant intellect. One accepted her at her own value, as the world invariably does, and forgot the surroundings in admiration for the woman, since even the most captious could not deny her gifts the meed of recognition, if not of admiration. She gave me from the first the impression that she it was who made the room, and not the room that made her, or in other words a *grande dame* is ever a *grande dame* whether she dwells in a palace or a hovel. Not that the old house in Park Street was a hovel by any means, for it might have been a miniature palace if the money had been there to adorn it and fill it with the treasures of art, the books and paintings that would have set off the grace and distinction of poor Lady Wilde and given her a frame worthy of her position.

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If I digress somewhat from the account of that meeting, it is due to my desire to confute many

unkind and misleading reflections made on Lady Wilde by those who received hospitality at her hands and were assiduous in their attendance at her receptions—chroniclers of so-called autobiographies really made up of society gossip, who, for the sake of padding, no doubt, resorted to fictitious wit in the way of ridicule at her expense, forgetting—or perhaps ignorant of the fact that ridicule is not wit, and a very poor substitute for humour. Where the ridicule is at the expense of the writer, it may be amusing if not witty, but where it is at the expense of another it is in distinctly bad taste and contrary to the true art of autobiography, which should be a purely personal narrative. Assuredly it is a mark of limited intelligence and fictitious literary pretension in those chroniclers who retailed absurd stories of Lady Wilde's eccentricities in dress or bearing and overlooked her genius for the lost art of conversation and the intellectual gifts that drew to her At .Homes Browning, Tom Taylor, Lady Martin, and other celebrated men and women of letters. And, moreover, that these merciless chroniclers should batten on the dead bones of poor Lady Wilde's\* memory in order to feed their starved

imagination and fill their vapid pages, is a disgraceful proof of woman's inhumanity to woman, to paraphrase the well-known saying.

## V

"TELL me of your wonderful country!" said Lady Wilde, when the tea was served.

I responded eagerly to her request, prompted by that enthusiasm for America, the land of my birth—that through all my wanderings has never abated. "Once an American always an American," I told her when I had finished my long and glowing account to which she listened with deep attention, for she understood the art of being a good listener as she did the art of being a good talker.

"Ah!" she said with a sigh, "the Irish people dream of America as a paradise, but some of them find the reality anything but a paradise!"

I knew she was thinking of the experience of her son, and I hastened to tell her all the pleasant things I had heard of him, and the interest manifested in his personality by many of the foremost American writers. I related the episode of my meeting with him at the dinner given by her old friend.

"You have the real Irish gift of eloquence,"

was her delighted and flattering comment on my description.

"No, Lady Wilde!" I protested "I have what we Americans call the real Irish gift of the gab!" Upon which we both laughed.

"You are too modest," she added with that fine spirit of courtesy that was so characteristic of her. Then after a pause: "Oscar could not have told it better!"

She gazed at me for a moment in silence. I felt that some *arrière pensée* influenced her scrutiny of my face. I was right, as she presently said: "Will you lift your veil, that I may see your face better?"

Lady Wilde continued her scrutiny, and then observed in all seriousness:—

"Yes, I was not mistaken—you have the gift of thought as well as of speech—you should be a writer. Have you ever written anything?"

Her words had an electric influence on my mind. They were as the flash of sun-lit shores to the straining eyes of a mariner in strange waters. I felt that I was nearing an unknown land to which I had been unconsciously drifting.

"You flatter me!" I said to hide my emotion,

my hope. "It must be a very difficult thing to write well, to be worthy of recognition as a writer. I have written—childish verses that pleased my dear mother—and won prizes at the Convent for verse and essays, but that is nothing—everyone wrote verses and essays in the rhetoric class. I am fond of writing letters—my friends do me the compliment to treasure them—but surely, you are not serious when you tell me I have the gifts necessary to make a writer?"

"Never more serious in my life," answered Lady Wilde. "Think well of it—and begin at once—come to me if you need guidance and criticism. I will help you all I can! Write as you have spoken to-day and success will follow. I am sure of it!"

Her words fell like seed on a fruitful soil. I could have knelt at her feet and reverently kissed her hands—and I might have done so, carried away as I was with mingled feelings of admiration and gratitude, in my joy, had not the door opened at that moment.

"My son, Willie," said Lady Wilde, rising to greet the new comer.

Willie Wilde's greeting was full of that breezy cordiality that contrasted so markedly with the



stately manner of his brother Oscar. He set one completely at ease. He was in his own way as brilliant a speaker and as polished a writer as his brother. But he lacked the boldness and originality of method which characterised Oscar Wilde. He adopted journalism, and much, if not all of his fine work, has been lost in the quagmire of anonymity. Oscar Wilde was difficult to understand, but not more so than Willie Wilde, who was an amiable cynic, and enjoyed mystifying the world when he was not laughing at it, as much as his famous brother did. At the moment of which I write he was a man, in the true sense of the word, working valiantly in the hardest worked profession in the world, hiding his resentment against reverses of fortune under a gallant front, and perhaps fighting hardest against himself—this is all I feel justified in recording. His faults and his failures belong to influences and adverse circumstances, and should be sacred to friend and foe alike, now that he is no longer here, but sleeps the sleep of the broken-hearted !

Willie Wilde was neither dandy nor poet. He was not possessed by the spirit of the dreamer that endowed his mother with such lofty indifference

to her surroundings. Almost his first word to me was a veiled apology for the disorder reigning in the old house.

“ We are in a state of transition ! ” he said, with his ingratiating smile. “ Everything is topsyturvy, due to the preparations for our removal to another house.”

“ Yes,” added Lady Wilde, “ we are leaving it owing to the deterioration of our landlord—he has developed commercial instincts, and is desirous of converting the place into a shop—or pulling it down to make way for a more profitable building than it is at present.”

She paused and dismissed the subject with a wave of her hand, but her son continued the sentence by saying with marked empressement :—

“ You must consider yourself quite favoured under the circumstances by mother’s little reception for you alone. We hope to receive you in our new house and have any amount of pleasant people to meet you.”

His manner was so genial that it robbed his words of just a shade of patronage that might have deceived me into the impression that he was somewhat of a snob ; but he was too frank and natural

to belong to that phase of London society so delicately defined and exquisitely satirized by Thackeray. I felt, however, that I had in my admiration for Lady Wilde prolonged my visit beyond the usual time. The appearance on the scene of her son and his friend seemed to bring me back to reality, and I arose to make my exit with as much grace as possible to hide my embarrassment. Lady Wilde bade me a cordial, I might say affectionate, goodbye, with the pressing invitation to renew our acquaintance when she would be settled in the new house. On my way home, I suddenly remembered the fact that no mention of Oscar Wilde had been made by his brother Willie, and I fell to wondering thereon.

## VI

THE environment of Old Chelsea was a more congenial atmosphere for Lady Wilde than that of fashionable Mayfair. Chelsea had been for a long period the haunt of artistic and literary spirits, and sanctified by the shrine of Carlyle's house, only a few minutes' walk from Lady Wilde's door in Oakley Street. For the same reason no doubt Oscar Wilde set up his home in Tite Street, when he returned with his charming young bride from their honeymoon in Paris. Oakley Street at that time was a pleasant quiet spot ; its wide roadway sweeping to the river, displayed on both sides comfortable old-fashioned buildings, some embowered in ivy—that have since given way to more pretentious houses with ornamental facades and chimneys, although the row containing Lady Wilde's house is unchanged. The street is short, beginning at the King's Road and terminating in the Embankment at the point where the fine Albert Bridge stretches its graceful structure across the

Thames. This position rendered Oakley Street very accessible, a fact to which Lady Wilde was not slow in directing one's attention. "All London comes to me by way of King's Road," she used to say in her most impressive manner. "But the Americans come straight from the Atlantic steamers moored at Chelsea Bridge"—a statement that was always hugely enjoyed by the Americans who thronged her rooms during the season when she held her weekly Saturday receptions. Much of her popularity was due to her son Oscar's fame with the cultured classes from New York and Boston. Many of the distinguished literary people who had entertained and admired Oscar Wilde during that famous lecture tour, hastened to pay their *devoirs* to his mother on their arrival in London. One of the most notable—Oliver Wendell Holmes—was given a special reception by Lady Wilde, at which some of the most distinguished literary men and women of London were present. I have not the least doubt but that the very bizarre aspect of Lady Wilde's surroundings was an attraction in itself. It was like a visible reproduction of the quaint rooms and assemblies described by Thackeray, Lever or Dickens. Ordinary people

in search of intellectual pleasure rarely notice the *ensemble* of the places they visit when a famous personage, a curiosity, a character study, great or small, is to be found there. And many have a secret antipathy to show-houses. They care little for the vagaries of the host or hostess, provided their pursuit after the intellectual and artistic is being rewarded. And, nowhere in all the world can one find a people so eager for the curious, the entertaining or the bizarre, as the people of London. Society will flock in crowds anywhere to find a new sensation or process of killing time. Witness the crowded At Homes, where people crush like sardines in a box, happy in the idea that they are enjoying themselves in proportion to the crowd. To be one of a crowd is the delight of London society folk. It was considered very intellectual to frequent Lady Wilde's crushes, just as it was considered very musical to flock to the Sunday At Homes of Mrs. R., a beautiful American, with a wonderful voice, who seldom sang herself, but gave others that privilege. The two salons were at the opposite ends of London, one in Belgravia and the other in Chelsea, and were at that time the only gatherings that could be dignified by the title of salon in the

real sense of the French word. It is true there was a third gathering that styled itself The Salon—but it was more in the nature of a Club, as it had a settled membership at the modest fee of one guinea a year, and held its evenings in a hired hall, generally a picture gallery, where the members received their friends and regaled them on claret cup, coffee and sandwiches, while they were entertained by musical or dramatic artists. And, I may add, both were of a very superior order and atoned for the meagre refreshment offered. But Lady Wilde and the fair American made no such blunders—the tea and accessories were of the best at both houses, although it must be admitted there was a difference in the service! For many years the musical salon of Mrs. R. was sacred from the Press, fashionable reporters being strictly debarred. But with Lady Wilde it was quite the other way. She was at the mercy of every petty news-monger, a circumstance of which she was fully cognisant, but treated with the broad courtesy that she awarded to all who wielded the pen in the cause of the Press. It must be said for the many that her tolerance was appreciated and respected, but for the few, who took advantage of her eccentricities

to pad out accounts of her receptions in their chronicles, the obvious lack of good taste is its own criticism. Those pleasant, original and interesting private gatherings now have been swallowed up by the craze for clubs for women, the first of which was formed by a writer who frequented Lady Wilde's salon, and no doubt received the inspiration there for that which developed into a real boon for serious women-writers, dependent on their pen for a livelihood. But, unfortunately, the writer in question lacked the supreme tact of Lady Wilde, as well as her genius for leadership—for, sad to relate, she was finally ousted from the position of President of the Club by the ungrateful members, and that when the Club was fairly settled on its legs and able to look after itself. The affair created a small sensation in its way, but would be accepted as a matter of course at the present day—when women's Clubs have become so numerous, and the advanced views of the suffragette spirits have instituted the new principle out of the old—that *Might is Right*.

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Lady Wilde resumed her Saturday receptions with great *éclat*. It was a beautiful summer afternoon, and old as well as new friends crowded the



rooms on the first floor of the house in Oakley Street. For some occult reason she never received in the drawing room. People were coming and going as I arrived, quite a long line of hansoms and broughams designated the house, and my cabman set me down without troubling to ask the number. The intelligence of the hansom cabman of those days was to me a matter of perpetual surprise. They were the most expert ready-reckoners I have ever met, while their faculty of mind reading was to me extraordinary.

The door at the top of the flight of street steps was wide open, I could see no servant of any description to announce me, so I followed the people who entered and preceded me. A rather difficult task, as those leaving the house were pushing their way out until the small and narrow hallway was quite packed. I felt thoroughly uncomfortable. It was my first experience of a London society crush. I could not avoid marking the contrast between the customs of Chelsea and Belgravia, where I had attended the previous Sunday afternoon the musical *At Home* of my fair compatriot. There all had been perfectly conducted, from the smart footman who opened the door and passed

one on to the dainty maid, who in her turn invited one to partake of the refreshment in the cool, shaded dining-room, before ascending the crimson-carpeted stairway, at the top of which the hostess awaited her guests. The house was equally small, but the order in the domestic arrangements made one quite overlook the modest proportions of the hall and staircase. The contrast in the two houses did not impress me favourably. I began to grow impatient at the pushing and jostling by a crowd of people, every one of whom might be a celebrity, but celebrities have, sometimes, sharp elbows and wear large and heavy boots. However, I found myself finally at the door of the reception room, which seemed to my eyes, filled with the sunlight of the outer air, shrouded in darkness, pierced here and there by a dimly gleaming red light. I stood there for some minutes on the threshold, unable to advance or recede in the crowd. As my eyes gradually became accustomed to the twilight of the rooms before me, I could discern faces that stood out with Rembrandtesque distinctness. It gave me the strange feeling of recovery from an attack of blindness to see those shadowy faces, while the uproar from those voices of the unseen, produced on

me quite an uncanny sensation. This, with the close atmosphere of the rooms, was making me decidedly nervous, when the sound of Lady Wilde's voice broke the unpleasant spell. She called me by name, and the people before me considerably giving way, I found myself beside her, hardly conscious of how I got there, and feeling the cordial pressure of her hand on mine. In the semi-darkness she loomed up a majestic figure, her headdress with its long white streamers and glittering jewels giving her quite a queenly air. She presented several people to me—but I managed to retreat into a corner of the room until my eyes grew accustomed to the obscurity, and I could note its occupants and study the gathering of long-haired poets and short-haired novelists—smartly dressed Press women, and not a few richly gowned ladies of fashion.

## VII

A NEW arrival, for whom every one made way, relieved the scene of its monotony. It was Oscar Wilde—but how changed ! As he bowed over his mother's hand I noted the up-to-date elegance of his attire—the short, crisp locks of hair, with just a suspicion of the old-time wave, brushed back from the high brow, the indefinable air of the dandy that hung around him. He was no longer the æsthetic *poseur*, but a resplendent dandy, from the pale pink carnation in the lapel of his frock-coat to the exquisite tint of the gloves and the cut of the low shoes of the latest mode. Someone brought me a cup of tea and a sandwich, and then began a one-sided conversation, in which I played the part of listener, as I was too fascinated by the metamorphosis of Oscar Wilde to respond. He spoke little, but seemed to efface himself that his mother might display her brilliant wit and hold everyone by the charm of her conversation, but his voice, in the few words of greeting he exchanged

with friends, had a triumphant note that was absent when I last heard him speak. His smile was as gracious, but more kindly. The covert sneer in it had vanished.

"Yes," I thought, "marriage has certainly improved him."

Gradually the crowd thinned out, and one could see and hear with some degree of comfort. It had been a great success, that first Saturday reception, and Lady Wilde was fairly sparkling with satisfaction. She espied me in my corner, and brought her son Oscar to talk with me. By this time the maid had placed numerous lamps about, and I could see his face very distinctly. If I had been surprised by the complete change in his appearance, I was startled by the change in the soul that looked out of his eyes. It was a proud, contented, feminine soul, no longer veiled by wounded vanity and resentment. It was a soul at peace with itself. A soul radiant with hope and new ambition. A happy soul that had found its mate. He sat down beside me. I waited for him to speak. That silent interchange of soul communication held me mute. I wondered if he felt how clearly I read his soul. Whatever his thoughts, he concealed them under

the mask of his smiling eyes. I could read a gentle defiance under his gaze. After an instant that seemed an eternity I felt I could endure the spell no longer. I broke it by saying timidly :—

“ You don’t remember me ! ”

He bowed his head in the affirmative.

“ But we did not exchange a word ! ” I said.

“ Yes, Madame, I remember you quite well,” he said slowly, as though recalling the circumstances. “ You are the lady of the mournful attire and the joyous hair. The Niobe sans tears of that feast of roses sans thorns.”

I caught my breath between surprise and embarrassment. I resented his personal compliment to my hair. He spoke with that impersonal tone that robbed his words of flattery or sarcasm. Then he abruptly changed the subject

“ Are you making a long stay in London ? Have you met my wife ? No ? Then we must have you to tea. Constance will send you a card.”

He arose and without another word moved through the rooms to take leave of Lady Wilde, and was gone. The impression he left with me was a varied one. I did not know whether to be annoyed or indifferent at his abrupt manner. I

learnt subsequently to understand the strange restlessness that he always evinced in my presence. He was drawn to me by an intellectual sympathy and at the same time repelled by the subconscious knowledge of my power to read his soul. During the few moments of our conversation I experienced a succession of emotions—delight in his charming appearance, pleasure in the happiness revealed by his soul, flattered that he should have observed me so keenly at that memorable dinner—and then, a curious distrust—altogether I found Oscar Wilde astonishing and *difficile*, an enigma that would be worth the solving, and I awaited with much interest the card of invitation to his wife's At Home. I wished to know that other soul to which he was so gladly mated.

\* \* \* \* \*

I doubt if Oscar Wilde fully realised his soul at that period. He seemed nearer to the knowledge at our first meeting. Failure and ridicule was then slowly lifting the veil concealing the terrible power of the forces of that supreme feminine spirit. But, on this occasion he seemed lulled into confidence in his soul by the security ensured through his happy marriage to a rich and lovely wife. There

was no longer any need for eccentric and startling self-advertisement, no call on his resources as a literary jester, to force success and gain—to speak plainly—a livelihood; no longer the necessity of a pose to conceal his poverty. He had yet to learn that the soul is the enemy of the body, and where the body outrages the soul, the soul's revenge is the destruction of the body.

He was wrong when he wrote "Soul and body—body and soul. How mysterious they are. The senses can refine and the intellect can degrade."

He should have written :—"It is the senses that can degrade and the intellect that can refine." But he wrote those words before he came into the full communion with, and comprehension of his soul, through the throes of social disgrace.

Looking back to those pleasant hours passed at Lady Wilde's Saturday receptions, I can feel vividly, even at this time, my impression of some lurking danger, some unexpected catastrophe when Oscar Wilde was present. He would saunter in towards the end, and after saluting his mother, take a position by the chimney piece and strike a graceful pose. Whenever I was in the rooms I drew as much as possible out of his view. That curious feeling of



danger rendered me shy and nervous. I have, alas, in the light of subsequent events, discovered the meaning of my presentiments. Sherard related in his "Story of an Unhappy Friendship," a curious experience of the same prophetic instinct in the incident of the swordstick. He likewise discovered the meaning of that impulse as he writes years after it occurred :—

"I do not know if a passing madness had really put my friend in danger in one of the happiest moments of his life, but I have sometimes thought since that here was a premonition—in what mysterious manner suggested I cannot say."

At the moment of which I write I attributed my feeling to my own lack of brilliancy and wit. I feared to say anything lest I should not say it well. I had not yet found the courage of expression. Oscar Wilde was not yet famous in the eyes of the world, but to me, who divined his genius, he was already a great personage. Beneath the polished veneer of his indifferent manner he was keenly sensitive, and my avoidance of him did not very long escape his eye. He made it a point to seek me and draw me into conversation. Perhaps he would not have singled me out for those little

marks of attention had he not observed my devotion and admiration for his mother, and heard her sing my praises.

"My mother tells me that you can write," he said, one afternoon after a fruitless effort to lure me into talking about myself.

"She is very kind," I managed to say.

"And she tells me," he persisted, "that you are a wonder as a talker—consequently you must be a wonder as a writer, as it takes two wonders to make a miracle—now when are you going to perform a miracle for me?"

"A miracle!" I exclaimed indignantly. His sarcasm roused me, and I was very near losing my temper.

"Yes, it is not a very difficult miracle," he rejoined with a boyish laugh of amusement over the way in which he had nettled me. "It is only a Christmas story. Will you write one for me? You have heaps of time between now and Christmas to perpetrate a score of miracles!"

I was in the seventh heaven of delight—to write a Christmas story, and for the charming magazine edited by Oscar Wilde. It was really too good to believe. My eyes sought Lady Wilde. She had

evidently overheard our talk, as she nodded her head in encouragement.

" But how ! " I stammered.

" That is easy enough ! " he answered quizzingly.

" You have only got to think and then write. Come, think now—give me the plot. . . . "

His eyes fairly danced with merriment over my being cornered so cleverly. But I was on my mettle. My imagination did not fail me. I pictured a scene in the desert of the Sahara—an Arab magician—the strange transference of thought personality—the interchange of souls through the mysterious power of life after death. Oscar Wilde regarded me curiously, and after a pause said gravely :—

" You have imagination—but that is the least of the work. You must cheat imagination of the unreal—clothe it in the semblance of reality. You must deceive to convince. Now let me have that story soon—but remember this most essential point—never put pen to paper until you have completely built your plot and thought out every detail. Then go to work."

I have never forgotten that simple rule, and have found it an invaluable guide in whatever form

I adopted wherein to express my inspiration.

Of the fate of that Christmas story I will not write here. The adventures of its loss would form a tale in itself—but it served to launch me into the fascinating, yet hazardous career of the writer.

Society began to take Oscar Wilde seriously when he became the editor of the *Woman's World*. He was at once a man of importance in the eyes of all those ladies who adopted a literary role as a pleasant pastime or a means of local celebrity. There was a flutter in the boudoirs of Mayfair and Belgravia when the *Woman's World* appeared. Lady Wilde's Saturdays were thronged. Ladies of high degree and ladies of no degree—poets and painters, artists and art critics, writers and scribblers, all eager to attain a place in the pages of the new magazine. It was a Bunthorne assembly over again, with the difference that now Oscar Wilde posed as the apostle of literature instead of æstheticism, and, where formerly the lily and sunflower reigned, sheaves of manuscript, clusters of poetical lilies, flowers of fancy in the way of sketches of pen and pencil, held sway in that feast of intellect that had superseded the feast of æsthetic beauty. Those were the gala-days of the Oakley Street receptions,

presided over by Oscar from his place before the chimney piece, where, in an attitude of smiling boredom, faultlessly dressed, an elbow on the mantel shelf, the large, white, shapely hand supporting the Olympian chin, the other hand toying nervously with the richly jewelled charms suspended from the chain displayed across his breast, he listened to the string of compliments interlarded with sotto voce requests for favours, of his mother's guests. But he was not coerced by all that adulation of the fashionable mob seeking to see their names in print. He was too genuine a literary genius to be caught by literary chaff. And if the placid smile of literary boredom vanished in a look of real interest, it was when his eyes encountered among that chaff the leaven of literature in those distinguished contributors to the pages of the *Woman's World*, who had come to honour the gathering by their presence.

## VIII

LADY WILDE's historic Saturdays had grown so popular, and consequently so overcrowded by all sorts and conditions of people, since almost everyone felt privileged to bring one or two friends to see her or her famous son, that she was obliged to select another day, usually a Wednesday, to which she asked the select few worthy of a position as literary folk of distinction. Ouida, who possessed a great admiration for Oscar Wilde, graced one of those Wednesdays by her presence ; a decided favour on Ouida's part, as she detested society and its women. But on that occasion she was extremely amiable and delighted the few present with her brilliant conversation. She rivalled Lady Wilde in that respect, as well as by her eccentricity in dress. Her blonde hair, still bright and untouched by time, was arranged in an elaborate old-fashioned coiffure of chignon and curls, her headgear was a blending of bonnet and hat, while her mauve silk gown was elaborately flounced and covered with

costly Italian lace. She had beautiful hands, covered with rings displaying rare jewels in curious settings. She spoke in quick, disjointed sentences with a peculiar accent, and constantly referred to Oscar—in fact she directed all her conversation to him.

On another occasion the late Louise Chandler Moulton, the American poetess, was present, and recited in her low sweet voice, some of her exquisite verses, to the delight of everyone, including the over-critical Oscar himself.

Lady Wilde had a keen appreciation of talent and an unerring faculty for discovering genius. Had she been more favoured by fortune in the way of wealth, she would have rescued many an unknown poet or writer from the oblivion and failure to which lack of means consigned their gifts. One of the prominent figures at her Saturdays was W. B. Yeats, whom she invariably greeted as "My Irish Poet!" Many, who doubted her enthusiasm then, have since learned to accord to Yeats his place as a true poet, worthy of the title.

The scoffers, alas! were not few, who met at those Saturdays. Some openly laughed in the face of Lady Wilde. Whether she was conscious of that

ill-bred ridicule is difficult to say, as she comported herself with the same stately dignity and hospitality to all. She possessed the supreme tact of appearing to ignore any *gaucherie* on the part of her guests, and she had the admirable faculty of appearing not to understand that which did not please her. She rarely corrected anyone, although on one occasion, when I introduced a well-known American singer, as remarkable for her vulgarity as she was famous for her wonderful voice, who had the temerity to say :—" Lady Wilde, you remind me of my dear old grandmother," I was gently admonished not to bring the lady again.

" But, dear Lady Wilde—" I stammered in confusion, " she is a most respectable woman."

" Respectable ! " repeated Lady Wilde. " Never use that word here. It is only tradespeople who are respectable. We are above respectability ! "

I did not argue with my friend, but took her strange lesson on social distinctions in all seriousness, and never attempted to introduce another *respectable* woman at her At Homes. Lady Wilde was no doubt right in her use of the word, but it was just such observations that gained her many enemies in the guise of pretended friends, one or two of



whom have most unjustly ridiculed her memory by absurd stories. I call to mind one case of a portrait artist, and a compatriot of Lady Wilde, who fairly haunted her Saturday receptions in search of subjects. Perhaps to the artist's failure in securing sitters is due the unkind facetious pen-portrait of Lady Wilde, which the artist gives in a book of "Recollections." I had, at the time of which I write, caught the prevailing craze, so fashionable then, for being photographed or sketched, and was almost persuaded by Lady Wilde to have my portrait painted by the artist in question. It may be that I might have saved poor Lady Wilde that posthumous ridicule had I consented to sit for the portrait, as the artist was unfortunately unable to obtain a single commission among the many friends of Lady Wilde. Another lady, also seized with the ambition of appearing in print, has used poor Lady Wilde as a sort of literary dummy, upon which to pose a silly tale of her donning three gowns one over the other—whether as a matter of necessity or whim is not made very clear—the story being ostensibly related to illustrate Lady Wilde's Irish eccentricities. I can cap it by an instance of English eccentricity which came under

my observation during one of my voyages from New York to Southampton, in the person of an English baronet with a double name, who was the laughing stock of the entire ship, owing to the indiscreet talk of his valet, who disclosed the fact that his master wore three suits of clothes under his enormous overcoat ! There was some reason for accepting the veracity of the valet, as everyone noticed the remarkable diminution in the bulk of the baronet when he disembarked at Southampton.

Poets and authors had a pretty knack of making presentation copies of their books to Lady Wilde. Her bookshelves and tables were always filled with these offerings, which she valued highly. Nothing gave her more pleasure than the sight of some young writer, book in hand, entering her rooms, and advancing, timidly or proudly as the case might be, to beg her acceptance of the volume.

“ What ! another book ! ” she would exclaim.  
“ Well done ! ”

Then the book would be passed round for inspection, and, in the case of the donor being a budding or full-fledged poet, the reading of one of the poems would form the feature of that occasion. In this

way she sought to encourage the love of the art which she adored. She took every offering seriously in her enthusiasm to help others up the perilous heights of Parnassus. Very naturally this habit of presentations overloaded her bookshelves and the inevitable happened, upon which the authors did not count—as old books must give place to the new.

T. D. O'Sullivan, the Irish poet and patriot, who wrote "God Save Ireland," was present, when a poet, whose name is now a household word, came to Lady Wilde with a slim little book of verses.

"May it be as useful as my presentation." O'Sullivan whispered to me. Whereupon he told me the following amusing story:—

Somewhere in the fifties he presented Lady Wilde with a rare and valuable first edition, and inserted his name therein. Years after, when looking through the books on sale at a second-hand book shop in London, he came upon the identical copy, still bearing his inscription to Lady Wilde. A sense of humour prompted him to buy the book and, with an additional inscription, presented it to her a second time. She appeared to be greatly pleased with the gift; then, with a sly smile, he asked her

to read the two inscriptions and note the dates. Lady Wilde opened the book, glanced over the dedication, and with a humour equal to his own, observed gravely :—

“ And a very useful book it proved, my friend, for it served, like Cæsar’s dust, to fill up a hole in my purse ! ”



## BOOK II

### I

CONSTANCE WILDE ! As I write a vision of her sweet face and graceful personality seems to arise in the vista of the past. A face whose loveliness was derived more from the expression and exquisite colouring than from any claim to the regular lines that constitute beauty. Sympathy, sensitiveness and shyness were expressed in that charming womanly face, and revealed a character intensely feminine. Not a touch of masculine strength could be traced in brow or chin. It was a feminine soul that gazed forth from the windows of her clear, thoughtful eyes, a pathetic soul that lent a shade of sadness to her brightest moods. Yes, Constance Wilde was a thoroughly womanly woman. Had she been otherwise, the social tragedy that obscured her happiness and broke her heart, would have been averted. A masculine woman would have succeeded in controlling the fate of her husband

through sheer force of resolute measures, whereas she failed through the innate delicacy of her woman's heart and the feminine intellect that rendered her unable to cope with the complex problem of her husband's genius. But she was the purely normal woman, born to mate with the purely normal man, a union that constitutes the root of married happiness and the foundation of the home in its best and noblest sense. Genius should wed with genius, in order that the lesser genius should sustain and inspire the higher ; for, in marriage, as in every other partnership, there is the passive and active condition—the silent partner who is never seen, but whose influence is demonstrated by the success of the combination. The wife of the genius is the silent partner when her dowry is an equal, but passive portion of genius, since it is only genius that can understand genius, curb its vagaries and direct its course along the right road to success. The wives of many great men have possessed the priceless quality of tact, that is in itself a prerogative of genius. Tact will sometimes succeed where even genius fails. Tact is the secret of doing and saying the right thing at the right time and in the right way. Constance Wilde lacked the supreme quality

of tact that would have overruled the transformation in her character which the genius of her husband endeavoured to accomplish. She was not gifted with the dramatic instinct, and thereby failed to assume the attitude of the *poseuse* that he aimed at, by making her an exponent of his theories of art and beauty. The wife of the apostle of beauty and æsthetics, he held, should not dress like an ordinary woman. She should be a living example of his inspiration, and teach women how to conform gracefully to his startling ideals.

It was too great a test.

Constance Wilde sought bravely to meet her husband's wish, and failed ; for she was not endowed by nature with the gift of posing. She yielded weakly through her lack of that tact which would have enabled her to hold her ground, and assert herself as the sensible womanly woman that she really was, and thereby she would have proved a curb to the vagaries of the genius and held the happiness and well-being of the man with a firm hand. Her very sincerity and devotion was her undoing. She failed as to his ideals, she failed as a *poseuse*. They drifted apart through lack of sympathy or perhaps through the recoil of too great sympathy between feminine souls.



Oscar Wilde was still the affectionate husband in the ordinary sense of the word, but he was no longer the teacher, the believer in the superior qualities of his gentle wife. He pitied her lack of appreciation, her failure to sustain the character he had designed for her. He was bored and disappointed by the slow collapse of his brilliant dream of creating a social epoch in the history of the English art of dress, which the fortune of his wife, together with her youth and beauty, encouraged him to attempt. He was bored for the reason that his vanity suffered by the overthrow of his ambition. Then, in that dangerous state of reaction when he was weak and weary and starving for inspiration—the very life of his genius—a strange and dangerous element entered his career. The intoxication of a new inspiration that stimulated his supreme passion of self-worship with the wine of admiration, flattery and sensuousness. Then issued the terrible battle between his noble feminine soul and the brute force of his powerful masculine brain structure.

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It was late in the London season—somewhere in the beginning of July when I received the long-expected card to the “ At Home ” of Mrs. Oscar Wilde.

I was eager to meet her, as I had been unfortunate in always just missing her on her brief appearances at Lady Wilde's Saturdays. The card announced it to be the last "At Home" and I looked forward to an interesting gathering of the literary set; but I was not prepared for the crush of fashionable folk that overcrowded the charming rooms of the unpretentious house in Tite Street. There was an air of brightness and luxury about it that was sadly lacking in that other old house in Oakley Street. A smart maid opened the door and I found myself drawn with the crowd in the wide hallway towards the dining-room. There tea was served in the most delightfully unconventional manner from a quaint shelf extending around the wall, before which white enamelled seats—modelled in various Grecian styles—were placed. By this arrangement the centre of the room was an open space, instead of being absorbed by the customary huge table laden with refreshment, and gave an impression of greater size and lightness to the room. Everything in the quaint room was carried out in a decorative scheme of white blended with delicate tints of blue and yellow, said to have been designed by Whistler. I presently found myself sitting in one of the white

Greek seats, drinking tea out of a dainty yellow cup that might have been modelled from a lotus flower, and being talked to by a young poet, while I watched the company passing in and out of that very æsthetic dining-room, that by its very simplicity, harmonised with the variegated summer costumes of the women, and the grey suits, or black frock-coats of the men.

The young poet gave me everyone's name, interlarded with a little amiable gossip, and then piloted me up the crowded staircase. We lingered a few moments in the smoking lounge at the head of the stairs, facing the drawing-room, to admire the room with its Eastern decorations, Oriental divans and Moorish casements. There we found our host smoking the inevitable cigarette and entertaining a bevy of clever-looking people who might have represented anything from the studio to the stage. He saw me, and at once rose to greet me with his kindly smile of reassurance, as I was just a little bit nervous at the informality of that ultra fashionable gathering, with no staid footman to announce me, and at the mercy of the chaperonage of my garrulous poet. Oscar Wilde's soft words of welcome placed me at my ease. "Come with me," he said, "I will find my wife. She is somewhere near."

In the drawing-room there was less crowding, and we moved about easily. I was attracted by the exceeding beauty of the ceiling, which was all I could perceive of the decorations, as everyone was standing. Oscar spoke of it with much pride as being a masterpiece of design by Whistler. After the ceiling, the next thing that arrested my gaze was a young woman arrayed in an exquisite Greek costume of cowslip yellow and apple leaf green. Her hair, a thick mass of ruddy brown, was wonderfully set off by the bands of yellow ribbon, supporting the knot of hair low on the nape of the neck, and crossing the wavy masses above the brow. The whole arrangement was exceedingly becoming to the youthful, almost boyish face with its clear colouring and full, dark eyes. There was an air of shy self-consciousness and restraint about the wearer of that fantastic yet lovely costume that gave me the impression of what is called stage fright, and I jumped to the conclusion that she was a young actress dressed up for a recital, and somewhat nervous before all the society folk present. Imagine my surprise when she was introduced to me as the hostess.

“ My wife,” said Oscar Wilde, as we paused before

her. Then he whispered, but not too low for me to hear :—

“ You are looking lovely, Constance—not a bit too tired with all these people.”

I saw her sweet face light up, and all the shyness and nervousness melt out of her eyes under those words of approval from her husband and teacher. She received me with that gentle cordiality that marked her bearing, but I could not overcome the first impression made upon me, and I was not quite at my ease in the consciousness of the secret weariness and effort that I knew lay under her smiling face and graceful bearing. I felt that she was bored and overwrought by the part she was playing before all those people—the æsthetic pose that she was not fitted to take. Perhaps something of this passed through the mind of Oscar Wilde, for he began to speak, and soon everyone was silent, and listening eagerly to all the beautiful things about art and life that he told us. His wife speedily sank into the background, completely forgotten and eclipsed by the brilliant glow of her husband's eloquence. He now occupied the place where she had stood, and posed there in an elegant and graceful attitude. When I looked about for her she had disappeared,

but I soon caught sight of her again beyond the doorway, in the crush of people in the hall, a rapt expression of love and pride on her face, while her eyes were fixed, as one magnetised, on her husband's inspired features.

There could be no doubt that, at that period of their married life, Oscar Wilde and his wife were still fondly devoted to one another. A son had been born to them, and the future was all rose-coloured. I met them frequently at the houses of mutual friends and had ample opportunity of studying the attempted metamorphosis of Constance Wilde into an artistic *poseuse*. Her gowns were startlingly original ; on one occasion purely Greek, on another early Venetian, in rich tints of old rose, with gold lace, high collar, trimmings and girdles. Again I would see her arrayed in draperies after the mediæval style, of cerise and black satin with necklaces of quaint gems, all of which she wore with a shy air of depreciation, a bearing that was not in keeping with the stately, sumptuous style of dress, and seemed a silent protest to the masquerade so antipathetic to her English training and taste. It is true she had many followers among the young girls and spinsters who affected the æsthetic pose, who

might be seen at the literary evenings of well-known writers in Regent's Park, Fulham and Chelsea. It was curious to note that the limp, clinging gowns had a more or less untidy bedraggled appearance in keeping with the touselled locks of these ambitious young and old women. I recall one young woman who hailed from Birmingham and was reputed to be the owner of a handsome income derived from coal, who gave bizarre receptions at her villa in Regent's Park Crescent—posed in an indescribable get-up of draperies that not even Oscar Wilde could have classified—who cultivated a tame black snake, and had no clocks in the house—a circumstance hugely irritating to those of her guests who carried no watch. She gave delightful suppers, which compensated for the lack of clocks, the snake and the æsthetic rags, but, pitiful to relate, she could not secure the Wildes for her receptions, much as she tried, even with the influence of Lady Wilde whose kind heart was touched by the young woman's enthusiasm. Such society as this was not the aim of Oscar's ambition. It was the exclusive set that came to his house, admired his wife and let themselves be amused by his wit that he wished to lead. However, it takes many failures to make a success

and those repeated failures drove Oscar Wilde to seek the fields wherein he achieved fame. Meanwhile he endeavoured to make a writer of his wife, but she only attained the plane of the compiler of fashion articles and the researcher of the genesis of historic costumes which she faithfully delved out of the literary treasures of the British Museum. He was bored at her lack of the literary instinct, forgetting the fact that he himself was at fault, through his inability to accept her at her own value, as the charming domestic spirit of his fireside. Oscar Wilde was singularly self-centred, an observer of life and character from his own standpoint only, and deceived himself by the belief that her money could command artistic success, as it had brought him a goodly measure of domestic comfort and social prestige. He saw his error later, when he learned the inutility of money in the making of brains, and resigned himself to the futility of transforming his wife into a genius that would inspire the world. Nevertheless, at that period their souls were in perfect accord through their love. It was only a matter of time when those two souls would drift apart, the beautiful soul friendship that bound them broken and lost by the



insidious influence of his strange beauty worship, upon which his genius was to feed at the cost of every noble, natural feeling. The approach of that dangerous influence was as slow as it was insidious.

## II

ABOUT this time a wave of occultism swept over London society. Whether the study of the occult accorded well with the æsthetic tendencies of the set that affected the Wilde manner I know not, but everyone was possessed with a craze for cheiromancy, star-gazing, planet-reading and the Egyptian cult of the unseen forces of good and evil. An order devoted to the study of these fascinating pursuits had arisen, under the leadership of a clever disciple of Egyptian lore. He was also a searcher into biblical mysticism, and had written a remarkable book, that no ordinary mind could understand, on the occult science of King Solomon. The Order was a secret one, though for what reason only the adepts knew, as the aim of its studies and research was an innocent and commendable desire to cultivate the old arts of occultism and fathom the mysteries of magic both black and white, practised by the learned magicians of the mediæval times.

And here I may explain in a few words my own

theory of occultism, the result of deep and serious consideration of a subject that has attracted men and women of acknowledged mental ability and scientific reputation. Occultism is the profound instinct of the unknown and the invisible, that the soul has implanted in the brain as a defence and safeguard against those mysterious unseen forces that threaten life on every side ; the sense of premonition, the impulse of self-preservation, the fear of annihilation are the roots of this strange power called occultism, a power that the wise man of olden times did not disdain to recognise and cultivate. Superstition is ignorance, whereas occultism is knowledge—and the one should not be confounded with the other, since the one belongs to the senses and the other to the soul. Superstition weakens the will by a sense of imaginary dangers, whereas occultism is the subtle keeper of the will by cultivating the sub-consciousness of dangers that oppose it, and renders the will fearless of the unseen evil, since it gives the will confidence to cope with it by teaching the will the futility of evil, when the will is armed with good. I am referring to the true use of occultism and not to the spurious use to which it is put by the superstitious and the curious.

It was something of this spirit that influenced the founder of the Order in London. His enthusiasm was the means of drawing many clever people to his séances. The secret character of the proceedings was an attraction to the busy idlers of society, while the serious portion of the members found it more agreeable to pursue the study of the occult without running the risk of ridicule.

I was favoured by an invitation to join the Order. After some little deliberation I decided to accept, as I felt it could do me no harm and might do me good; a decision I have never regretted, for the reason that the very serious study in Oriental and scientific subjects that I had to undertake in order to pass the various degrees, developed a habit of concentrated thought that assisted me greatly in my literary career, just then in its initial stage. The studies also brought me into closer intimacy with Constance Wilde. We were initiated into the Order at the same time; a somewhat theatrical ceremony that would have been amusing had it not been taken so seriously. I passed the ordeal quite composedly, but not so my companion, Constance Wilde. I felt her tremble, and the hand that held mine was icy cold. Her voice faltered over the

formula of admission that we recited together—a most formidable declaration, which threatened dire calamity to those who disclosed the secret studies or proceedings of the Order. My sense of humour was secretly tried on that occasion, and I felt more inclined to laugh, although Constance Wilde's beautiful eyes were full of tears. When it was known, later, that Constance Wilde had faithfully reported the ceremony and all details to her husband, many of the members attributed the tragic events that befell her family to the breaking of her pledged word. Naturally such a conclusion was absurd for many reasons ; but yet it goes to prove how dangerous the influence of occultism can be on the shallow-minded and superstitious. I record this apparently irrelevant incident because it had for me a deeper meaning than a mere passing experience or phase in the busy life of the intellectual worker. It brought my soul in touch with the soul of Constance Wilde, through our mutual studies and interchange of thought. I learned to read in that clear mirror her noble beautiful character and discern her secret unrest and sadness, her weakness and patience under the process of disillusionment through which she was passing. I divined that she

was not serious in the pursuit of occult knowledge, that she had an ulterior object in becoming a member, and that her end was to use the curious lore for some purpose other than that intended by the Order, and that her frank, truthful spirit chafed under the deception she was practising. Not that it was a matter of much consequence as the conditions imposed were not reasonable. Nevertheless it was a breach of confidence to give away the lore so laboriously and enthusiastically acquired by the members. However, I hold that Constance Wilde was in all reason entitled to use the occult philosophy in which the Order had no copyright as it was not original. It was at this point that Oscar Wilde wrote some of his remarkable stories founded on the occult or supernatural after the manner of Edgar Allen Poe and R. L. Stevenson, and I have no doubt that his inspiration was derived from the revelations of his wife's occult studies. The story of Dorian Gray is built on the mysterious force of suggestion. The metamorphosis of the picture of Dorian Gray illustrates the occult doctrine that inanimate objects can be imbued with the good or evil influence of their possessor by the powerful magnetism of the aura or spiritual atmosphere. It is a subtle and

fascinating theory that would appeal to the imagination of Oscar Wilde, and give a spur to his genius which was ever the slave of his inspiration.

\* \* \* \* \*

This was the beginning of the epoch when he lost touch with his soul. The powerful dominating masculine brain grew weary through the repeated collapse of his ambition. His failure as an æsthetic apostle—a poet, a society dandy and poseur—filled him with the desperation of despair. He lost patience, drifted away from the beautiful soul influence that was gently and surely floating him into the noble stream of pure and elevating literature—such as the “Happy Prince and Other Tales,” or “A House of Pomegranates.” He rebelled against the lofty inspiration of his feminine soul, whose power he scorned, and turned to the masculine brain for new and bizarre intellectual stimulant, and thought-impulse that would, through its sensationalism and morbidness of fancy, challenge attention and mark him as a curious and original thinker. Then ensued the battle between the feminine soul and the masculine brain, until finally the soul abandoned him, left the field clear to those unbridled impulses of the powerful, sensuous, masculine brain, and

retreated to lie in wait until the enemy had worn itself to weakness in the excesses of intellectual debauch and the time was ripe to reclaim the victory.

\* \* \* \* \*

“What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world *and lose his own soul?*” quoted Ignatius Loyola, philosopher and theologian, soldier of the Faith, founder of the greatest of religious orders for men, and profound student and doctor of men’s souls. The words of the Evangelist are imbued with a deeper meaning than the mere reading of those words convey. Soul is will, thought, inspiration, imagination. Soul is unlimited in its power. Soul is the force of God that sustains the body, the brain, and lifts both above the slavery of the senses. When the soul abandons the house of the intellect, which is the brain, withdraws its ballast and surrenders the body to its own devices, a prey to the merely animal instincts of the flesh, and the brain to the unbridled sway of the delirium of its unbounded fantasies, it is then that a man loses possession of his soul and becomes a vacillating being swung by the pendulum of his folly and passions. The escape of the soul is the most terrible calamity that could



befall the brain-building. Without the soul religion is powerless, art is futile, and reason unable to control and save the body. All this and more is conveyed in those immortal words,—

“ What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul ? ”

### III

OSCAR WILDE lost possession of his soul, but he gained the whole world through the force of the unrestrained genius of his masculine brain. Like a torrent his ambition swept all obstacles before it, submerged his reason, his prudence and all vestige of the sway of that noble feminine soul. He found an idol of clay with the semblance of human beauty. A living idol whose worship is as old as the world. His intellect became a flame of incense to that idol, and through its fumes his brain filled with strange, grotesque, exotic visions, thoughts and fantasies, which he transformed into brilliant essays, sparkling with gems of wit and paradox. His genius was stimulated by the nervous intoxication of that worship. His idol fed the spring of his imagination with new and marvellous thought sensation. He was no longer weary, bored or discouraged over his work.

His natural indolence rebelled against the literary slavery that has given to the world such masters of the art romance, as Dickens, Alexander Dumas,

Balzac, Victor Hugo and Bulwer Lytton, and essayists such as Carlyle, Ruskin and Pater—men who derived their inspiration from the pure springs of a noble and humane observation of life and its problems. To Oscar Wilde's feverish inspiration is due, it is true, the original and brilliant collection of essays in his book "Intentions," but their morbid and far-fetched theories are a proof of the emotional stimulus that fed his inspiration. The essay "Pen, Pencil and Poison" reveals the strange intellectual excitation that possessed his brain. His clever and witty defence of Wainwright, the essayist, who found in the crime of poisoning an incentive to his literary inspiration, reveals how strongly the bizarre and horrible tendencies of Wainwright's character fascinated Wilde, as it did in fact affect in somewhat the same manner the poet Swinburne.

Wilde had lost his soul, and, in the éclat of his loss, he blindly considered himself free, and sought, through the power and magnetism of his genius, to lure the mind of his readers to his standpoint of intellectual freedom. From theory it was but a step to practice. Through his study of vice grew the desire to make acquaintance with the sensation of vice.

And yet, the soul of Oscar Wilde had not completely abandoned him, for that supreme feminine soul had left a sentinel on the field from which she retreated, and that sentinel was the conscience, a presence from which, sleeping or waking, Oscar Wilde could not escape. The subtle disquietude that reigned in his brain found expression in "The Picture of Dorian Gray" and his essay on "The Soul of Man." These were written as a sort of peace-offering, a tribute to his rebellious soul, in order to palliate his conscience and delude him into a false sense of security; for, no one knew better than Oscar Wilde himself, that the day of reckoning, the hour of doom would finally come. He knew the danger of that spur of intellectual intoxication by which he sought to achieve success, as well as the drunkard knows that the demon of delirium lies in wait for him. On the other hand, who can withhold a sentiment of pity before the spectacle of that terrible battle between soul and brain, that was being waged within that house of genius which constituted the gracious, noble, brilliant personality of Oscar Wilde, or condemn the ambition that forced him to trade upon his intellectual monstrosities, as the beggar trades on

his bodily deformity? For what are paradox, epigram and retroversion of thought and expression, but monstrosities of the intellect?—glittering with the fascination of the bizarre and the original, it is true, but monstrosities all the same; unnatural problems born of a perverted literary instinct, abortions of inspiration forced into birth before they are perfected in the natural course of thought-expression.

One writer has styled Wilde a juggler of souls, but it was the reverse. It was the souls of men that juggled with his genius, and tossed it from one to the other in his pursuit of strange mental pleasures, wherein his thoughts encountered many intellectual atmospheres that left their varied impressions on his work. Just as the storm ravages the garden, or the sunshine melts it into bloom, the imagination of Oscar Wilde was influenced by the crisis through which it passed. In his essay of "Pen, Pencil and Poison," he holds that Wainwright's crimes seem to have had an important effect upon his (Wainwright's) art. Here perhaps was the seed that fructified into Oscar Wilde's desire to study the strange passions of crime. When, in the same essay, he declares that: "One can fancy an intense

personality being created out of sin," he unconsciously foreshadows his own fate. That he had a morbid admiration for Wainwright is evidenced in almost every line of that remarkable essay, and nowhere more strikingly than when he admits that—"The fact of being a poisoner is nothing against his (Wainwright's) prose." Wilde compares him with Disraeli as a dandy. He cites the admiration of two writers of such antithetical genius as De Quincey and William Blake. The latter, he asserts, wrote one of his most beautiful works specially for the gifted poisoner. Wilde dwells upon Wainwright's accomplishments as writer, artist and journalist, and declares that modern journalism owes as much to him as to any man in the early part of the century, and he quotes passages from the essays of Wainwright to support his admiration of the man's work as a writer, and gives fascinating pen-pictures of his rooms, his eccentricities in dress and his habits. All this carefully thought out and written eulogium as a tribute to the secret poisoner of three people, members of his own family, to say nothing of the "murders that were never made known judicially," as De Quincey has written! Wilde quotes the gossip of

others who talk of his life in Paris, where he is described as "skulking with poison in his pocket and being dreaded by all who knew him." Of this monster, Oscar Wilde has written in a style so brilliant that he has assisted in lending a halo of renown to the crimes of one, who, after all, was but a mediocre artist and writer who, through his notorious acts, won recognition; for, had Wainwright not exercised his terrible propensity for poisoning, his works would have been consigned to the oblivion they deserve.

Oscar Wilde himself affected a taste for the colour green, a favourite colour of Wainwright, which at that period took the place of his first affectation of the colour yellow. The sunflower was replaced by the "green carnation," an innocent fancy in itself, but which, under the circumstances, revealed a subtle affinity in the taste of the two minds—if it was not another pose on the part of the author of "Pen, Pencil and Poison."

On the heels of these remarkable essays came the novel: "The Picture of Dorian Gray," which, although Oscar Wilde declares that it was written as the outcome of a bet, bears the stamp of the influence of the study of the character of Wainwright,

moulded under another form into the personality of Dorian Gray. There is the same secret sin and crime, while he makes the picture an allegorical presentment of Dorian's conscience, just as Wainwright's conscience must have been a constant, unseen source of remorse for his secret crimes. There is, it is true, a complete change of personality, scene and time, but the motive is the same in both the fact and the fiction. Oscar Wilde leaves it to the imagination of the reader to define the sin, but that is after all the natural subterfuge of the romancer. Then, in the clever essay "The Soul of Man," in "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.," in "Salome," and in "The Harlot's House," we can further trace the influence of that same lurid imagination in Wilde. The seduction of passion, the glamour of vice, the startling and terrible realism of crime, seems to be the only spur that can goad his inspiration.

His brain successfully works in an atmosphere of mental narcotics that produce extraordinary and unnatural visions and theories that would elude a less powerful fancy, and vanish like the vagaries of a dreamer. But Oscar Wilde was no dreamer, he was intensely practical, and seized these brilliant vapours of his imagination and shaped them into



brilliant prose, just as Turner transfers to his canvas the strange, lurid aspects of nature. Wilde faithfully portrayed every emotion of that momentary intellectual delirium in language that ennobled and beautified the most repellant and improbable theme. He mastered the elusive and conquered the tyranny of words, blending them with the witchery of thought-suggestion, the inverse process of expression, just as the composer evolves his motif into music until the theme is so transformed and disguised that the original note seems lost in the succession of modulations, only to return with increased force and brilliancy in the end. Oscar Wilde became a juggler of words, an acrobat of expressions, that hold his readers breathless, while following the daring feats of fancy which he safely executed through the equilibrium of his mastery of irreproachable prose ; whereby he proves himself a painter in thought and a musician in words. He wisely abandoned poetry at the very outset. He turned his poetry into prose, that he might startle with greater ease. The veil of poetry was too modest for his purpose. He wished to shine by the dazzling light of terse, powerful prose, to fascinate and illude by the intricate play of words, by the

bizarre contortion of their meaning into curious paraphrase. That sur-excitation of his imagination changed, magnetised or disguised the thought material which he pilched from other writers, for there is no doubt that Oscar Wilde was often addicted to plagiarism, but with his supreme arrogance of genius his brain so assimilated and digested the sources upon which it fed, that they bloomed into a new and original form. He had the power to make old sayings and situations appear fresh and sparkling, to extract from them subtle perfume and colour, of which the original writer was unconscious. This is specially proved by his dramas. In "A Woman of No Importance," for instance, we see the "School for Scandal" from another point of view, with different perspective, and vistas that reveal old characters rehabilitated, and witticisms transformed by paraphrase.

Yet, with all this inspiration imparted by the incense of his worship of the idol that he had set up, Oscar Wilde was not content. He desired a wider, grander field than that of the essayist. He aimed at emulating the great bard himself, but only succeeded in emulating one of the lesser stars in that firmament of literary immortality. He undertook

the onerous rôle of dramatist, and found at last the instant success that his ambition craved. In the hybrid realm of literature, that is called the drama, he reached his apogee. Then only did the world recognise him. London laid her homage and her money at his feet ; and America, that had jeered at him as an apostle of the æsthetic, received him with admiring acclamation as the playwright. It is a curious coincidence that, in the sphere of oral literature that is, rightly or wrongly considered, immoral, he should attain the success denied him in the purely intellectual field of poetry, romance, and the literary philosophy, of the essayist ; yet this may be easily accounted for when we consider Oscar Wilde as a master of the spoken word. He lacked the genius of imagination necessary to the romancer. He wrote but one novel—"Dorian Gray"—and that is not a novel in the perfect sense of the word, but a study built on a succession of incidents, without plot or scenario. He was also lacking in the faculty of poetic plot. What success he attained, for example in the Newdigate prize poem, was due to his marvellous descriptive resources founded on realism. He did not comprehend the purely ideal. His inspiration could

only grasp the visible in time, place and characters. He understood man and woman, but he did not understand the souls of man and woman. He loved the puppet and not the spirit. It was more wonderful to listen to his words than to read them, up to the point when he embodied his words in the living frame of the stage. To hear him speak imparted a pleasure and fascination far beyond anything he had written, because speech was his true gift and not the pen. He was a master materialist, and sought to prove the supremacy of matter over mind. He felt keenly the beauty of all visible things—colour roused in him a sensuous delight that sound could not touch, in fact he was so lacking in the appreciation of music, that his only means of describing it was by comparing it to a colour. He writes of Dvorak, as the composer of “curiously coloured things,” and of his music as “a mad scarlet thung,” although, in this, Wilde follows Franz Lizst, who, in his marvellous essays on Wagner’s music, ascribes colour to the motif and modulations of the great composer’s music.

Oscar Wilde’s personality pervaded all he wrote. He was so intensely an egoist that only in the expression of the ego could he excel. He

abandoned critical literature, "tired of it very soon," and became a creature of his own ideals. His favourite form was the dialogue. That direct, facile mode of writing was the best method for his indolent character ; thereby he was saved the intellectual labour that shapes, evolves and polishes a thought into a gem of expression. He overcame the difficulty of dealing with opposite views of the same point by the use of the dialogue. It is easy to understand his sudden and surpassing success as a dramatist in the light of his facility for dialogue. He placed his words in the mouth of his puppets and let the puppets do the rest, by becoming the living description of the varying shades of expression, which he was too indolent to work out, or too lacking in imagination to present in a form equal to his dialogue. Success intoxicated Oscar Wilde to a reckless degree of mental arrogance that gradually influenced his life and mode of living. He played on the foibles of society as a musician plays on an instrument, with a dexterity and mastery of touch that no dramatist of his time has equalled. All the experiences of his failures rendered him an adept in the manipulation of satire. He lashed society

10, TITE STREET,  
CHELSEA, S.W.

Dear madame de  
Brimont,  
must

thank you for the  
nice things you say  
about my book, &  
for your kind offer  
of your own. But  
last, I should like  
receiving it under

fair pretences /  
feel that it is  
right to tell you  
that I never write  
reviews now of  
contemporary literature  
or indeed reviews  
of any kind. For  
a time reviewing  
interested me &

little, but I tire  
of it very soon,  
and I don't think  
I shall ever return  
to it

Believe me  
Sincerely yours  
Oscar Wilde



as a *dompteur* lashes his lions and tigers, sending society through its paces with his light, delicate touch, making it dance, or laugh, or cower before him. It was a hard and bitterly-earned success, won through the throes of that splendid brain-building, completely at the mercy of his supreme self-worship, and the adoration of that strange idol of the senses, that he had set up to feed his inspiration. Nevertheless, throughout the success, as throughout the failures, Oscar Wilde was thoroughly consistent. He worked out the problem of his success according to the rules he had so boldly proclaimed in his essays. He has written that :—

“ Every man of ambition has to fight his century with its own weapons.”

He fought society with its own weapons of polished vanity, greed of wealth and superficial virtue, with the two-edged sword of his staccato prose and ambiguous phrases, little heeding the danger of a recoil that would destroy him. He was lulled into a sense of security by the complaisance of that society which nightly filled three theatres to laugh and be amused before the mirror he held up to it with the one hand, while, with the other, he fashioned the shackles whereby that same

society bound him, cast him into prison, and then set him adrift as an outcast, beyond the pale of its charity and forgiveness !

#### IV

AFTER a prolonged absence, passed in South Africa, I returned to London richer in experience and in pocket. A course of arduous journalism in Johannesburg had matured my literary work. There is no better school for the writer than the daily discipline of journalism. It braces the intellect and teaches it to summon all its forces at a moment's notice. The command of ideas, the discrimination of words and the stimulant to critical observation in the daily routine of work is a splendid brake, so to speak, on the imagination, that would often lead the young writer into excesses of style and heights of fancy only reached by the great romancers after the ordeal of vast experience in the art of literature. Yes, I would advise all young writers to take a course of newspaper drudgery, real hard work: it will banish all dilettantism, and playing at being a writer, and will either make or mar, as every writer soon finds his or her level in the whirlpool of the newspaper mill, where the romances of life,

stranger and more terrible than any fiction, are ground out with merciless speed and exactitude. I had the field all to myself in those first days of Johannesburg, and I was the only woman journalist of the Rand. It was an absorbing, and perhaps dangerous, experience. The contrast between my fashionable existence in London—interspersed with dilettante literary efforts—and the laborious life of a newspaper woman in that wild, lawless, gold camp, taught me to know myself, to rightly gauge my powers, and to look on life with the clear eyes of experience. In that strenuous existence there is no place for the dreamer—and yet the poet can find there the truest inspiration in the tragic poetry of life that the printer “pulls” off the “daily plant.” And it was in the guise of the poet that I first appeared in print, as my first book of poems appeared in Johannesburg. Therefore in more senses than one I did not return empty-handed to London.

The first months after my arrival were full of work, as the fever of it had not yet been chilled by the cold atmosphere of London. And one day I wended my way to Oakley Street in search of the old house where dwelt my kindly godmother of the pen. I found Lady Wilde at home as usual, but the

Saturday receptions seemed to have lost some of their popularity. There was no crowd, only a few faithful habitués. Oh! the joy of that meeting. Across the bridge of years I see again her noble face alight with pleasure, hear her deep voice thrilling with words of welcome, as I groped my way into the darkened rooms by the dim glow of those ubiquitous red-shaded lamps. I was like a harvester returning home laden with the sheaves of my labour, five books, to lay at the feet of my dear goddess of the pen!

"Well done! Well done!" was all she could say, as she relieved me of my harvest. Then and there I had to give an account of my wanderings and the adventures of my work. I was like a literary Ulysses to whom she played the part of chorus—repeated "wonderful! wonderful!" at intervals during my recital of the new land of gold and its canvas city, that had sprung up in the midst of the desert of the high veldt.

When the first enthusiasm of her greeting had subsided, I was conscious of a subtle change in the atmosphere of the dim old room; something was lacking. There was no longer the joyous spirit of intellectual camaraderie that had made the dingy

146 Berkeley Street  
Chelsea  
Jan 30. 1890

Dear Contee,

My sincere Congratulations  
On your safe arrival from  
All the perils of South Africa.  
I hope you have brought  
home a lucky thing,  
Good to your Charitable Works.  
No Victim of some other as  
Mum on Wednesday

I will be happy to see  
you next Saturday if  
you can. Miss Otis  
will be home - the <sup>h.p.</sup>  
moment —

I want to hear all  
about your New Book  
that is announced  
in the papers.

I am very busy just  
now with numerous  
claims on my time &  
therefore - As I can  
only see friends on  
the one day (Saturday,  
at 6 o'clock for  
Dinner  
Sincerely  
—



surroundings bright with the interchange of wit. Lady Wilde no longer shone forth in her wonted brilliant manner. She said little, and more than once I fancied I heard her sigh softly. A cloud seemed to have fallen upon the house in Oakley Street. It appeared to be no longer the Mecca of literary aspirants, and the brilliant American birds of passage were conspicuous by their absence. I could not understand the change. It seemed impossible that, during the short time of my sojourn in South Africa, the popularity of Lady Wilde's Saturdays should wane so, that the crowd dwindled down to a half score of callers. Finally I ventured to ask after her son Oscar, and expressed the hope that I would see him that afternoon.

"It is not probable," Lady Wilde answered. "Oscar does not come when I have people here. He is so very much in demand everywhere, and he prefers to come when I am alone, as he has so little time now for me that he wishes to have me all to himself."

This was disappointing news to me, as I had looked forward to meeting him and showing him the fruits of my work—begun on his advice. Lady Wilde felt something of what was in my mind,

and endeavoured to palliate my disappointment. She began to relate, with much gusto and satisfaction, the successes of her son ; the great houses at which he was an honoured guest, and the visits he made to the various county seats of his admirers. I forgot my own feelings in the sympathy I felt for the mother's pride in her son. Still, my disappointment had cast a chill on my spirits, and I rose to go, but Lady Wilde pressed me to remain to sup with her. She suddenly appeared to me in the pathetic light of a lonely old woman, and much as I wished to escape from the changed atmosphere of that room, that had been formerly so interesting, I accepted the invitation. We supped on cold beef and salad, flavoured by a glass or two of white Italian wine, but I remember how I enjoyed that simple supper, seasoned by the wit and repartee of Lady Wilde, who excelled herself, and made me forget the dingy, badly lighted room, the gaucheries of the unkempt servant, and the flight of the hours under the spell of her charming talk, her observations on art and literature, her reminiscences and anecdotes. We were alone the whole evening, and, although it was late when I took my departure, I left Lady Wilde more brilliant and alert than when

I had entered that dim room in the early afternoon. She appeared no longer old, but full of the spirit and gaiety of youth. It seemed to me nothing short of marvellous—that power of recuperation under the stimulus of intellectual thought and conversation. I realised that age does not exist where the soul is young and the brain responsive to the inspiration of the youthful soul. Whatever the cloud that hung over that humble dwelling in Oakley Street, I knew that its mistress had escaped the shadow during that happy evening at least.

## V

THE night of the first performance of "Lady Windermere's Fan" (Feb. 20th, 1892), I was not in London. It was from Brighton that I sent a telegram to Oscar Wilde, wherein I wished success and good-luck to his new play. I timed the telegram, so that it would reach him at the St. James's Theatre just before the curtain rose. Although I had not met Oscar Wilde for two years, during my absence in South Africa, I had kept in touch with all that concerned him through my correspondence with Lady Wilde and the works from his pen. There was, however, a still stronger influence in my interest, and that was the mysterious soul-sympathy existing between us. He gave no sign of that bond, although he knew of the progress I had made in the career he had opened up to me. Nevertheless, I was strongly moved to give him a proof of my goodwill and appreciation that I knew he would be pleased to receive, and that would touch the sensitive and delicate sentiment of his Irish heart and temperament, so naively

superstitious about luck. At that anxious moment, therefore, when his play was about to be launched on the capricious and uncertain tide of public favour, I sent the telegram to bring him luck, and thought no more about it until more than a year later when he recalled the incident on our meeting at the annual dinner of the Authors' Society. Perhaps the only function of a purely literary character to be seen in London, at that time, was this gathering of authors at the annual dinner and reception of their Society. It was a representative collection of all the greater and lesser lights in the world of letters, assembled to feast and exchange social goodwill. In fact it might have been termed the Society of Mutual Admiration. Toasts and congratulations, witty speeches and compliments, were the order of the hour, under the almost perfect conditions of a public banquet ; for the Londoner is *par excellence* the best dinner-giver and diner in the world. On this occasion there was nothing to distract the eye or the ear from the business of the moment, no musical noise in the guise of an orchestra, or prodigies of the florist's art to obstruct the view of one's vis-à-vis, while the serious application of the diners to the pleasures of the menu, gave one

the impression that it was not more than once a year that such an opportunity of feasting came the way of the majority of them. With the toasts and speeches a general spirit of good comradeship prevailed. Everyone sought to learn who his or her neighbour might be ; there was a general study of the plan of the tables, and a passing from one to the other to seek old friends or make new ones. It was in that after-dinner hour of relaxation that I could turn my attention from my guest, an old author and soldier of the mutiny, who had found that the pen was not in his case mightier than the sword, and look about for interesting people. The first one my glance encountered was Oscar Wilde. He was my vis-à-vis at the table. I was completely taken by surprise, and somewhat embarrassed to find that I had not perceived him during the dinner. At first I thought my eyes had played me a trick, that it was not Oscar Wilde I saw, but someone with a very striking, yet unpleasant resemblance to him, someone older and more blasé than Oscar Wilde could possibly have become in those short three years since I had last seen him in Tite Street. I looked away, uncertain what to do, whether to bow or speak, yet feeling strangely

uncomfortable over the encounter. I longed eagerly to find out who the person was that had such a resemblance to Oscar, and was about to consult the plan of the tables, when a voice that I could not mistake addressed me, saying :—

“ Contessa ! Contessa ! ”

I knew then that it was indeed Oscar Wilde who was speaking, and addressing me by his mother's favourite name for me ! He had never used the word before when speaking to me, and I divined that it was in some subtle way an appeal, a reminder of his claim to my friendship for the sake of the deep affection I bore his mother. I felt a pang of misgiving, lest I might have, by my manner, inadvertently wounded him, and that he had used that name by way of a gentle reproof. My position was painful, as well as embarrassing, for I could not explain the change in him that had led me into the blunder of not recognising him at once. To have expressed any sort of apology would have only made matters worse. I was, furthermore, keenly disappointed that our first meeting after so many years should take such an awkward form, when I had looked forward to that meeting as a moment of modest triumph on my part and kindly praise

on his, for the success and work I had accomplished. Moreover, with this feeling of disappointment was mingled a curious sense of pity and foreboding—a premonition of disaster, and a resentment against the influences that had so changed him. My pride in his genius was hurt to the quick in beholding him only an ordinary guest at that dinner, when his rightful place should have been the chair of honour at the table allotted to the men and women who had won a distinctive celebrity by the pen. I could not speak through the stress of these conflicting emotions. And, then, a more terrible emotion than all seized me as I looked into his face—it seemed that I was gazing on one dead, for I could not see or feel his soul in the half-veiled gaze of those expressionless eyes under the lids that seemed heavy with the inexpressible weariness of boredom. That was one of the most painful moments in my life, the most swift disillusionment I have ever experienced ; while disappointment, pity, sorrow, and a sort of impotent rage against fate held me mute under the steady gaze of those soulless eyes ! I would have given much to have been able to answer his greeting by some conventional phrase or empty compliment, to have felt at ease in his



presence ; but a greater force than my will controlled me, the force within me that is called the soul, held me silent and aghast before the wreck of that other soul.

I know not whether Oscar Wilde divined all that passed through my mind in that brief moment after he spoke to me, but he evidently felt that I was disquieted, and sought to put me at my ease, with the rare tact which never failed him—by ignoring my embarrassment and silence :

“ Contessa,” he repeated in a very soft and gentle tone, “ I am delighted to meet you here. It affords me a long-neglected pleasure—the pleasure of thanking you for that very charming telegram you were good enough to send me on the first appearance of my play ! ”

He paused and regarded me with the glimmer of a smile that was the ghost of the smile I remembered. I was still mute.

“ I assure you, Contessa, I was much touched by your thoughtful good wishes. And I am certain that your telegram brought good luck to ‘Lady Windermere’s Fan’ ! ”

Again he paused and lit a cigarette, while I could only respond by a bow.

"Yes," he said, "I believe you brought me good luck!"

Then he arose, and holding his hand across the table, said with a return of his weary manner:—

"Good-night, Contessa, don't you find this dinner a bore, a most tedious affair? I do! Good-night!"

I gave him my hand as I arose. He pressed it gently and made a sign for me to be seated. Then he turned away and went slowly towards the door of the hall, followed by the two friends who had been his guests. I watched him until the doors closed after him, and then I sank into my chair, overpowered by a melancholy that not all the witty speeches and compliments in the air around me could dispel, a feeling of sadness that was not altogether due to my disappointment, but to my regret, to find Oscar Wilde so changed. The haggard eyes and bloated features, the indefinable expression that might have been weariness or some strange mental disquietude. It was true that he was faultlessly dressed and carried himself more than ever with the ease and arrogance of a supreme dandy. What was it—this change in one who had been the very impersonation of joyous manhood

and brilliant esprit ? Somehow I connected the cloud hanging over the old house in Oakley Street with his metamorphosis, and again, I attributed it to his sudden and startling success. He seemed to have that sort of intellectual indigestion that comes of a surfeit of success or a surfeit of money. And once the thought came to me that the light of his soul had gone out, and left him in the outer darkness which preludes madness. But I put the thought away, little dreaming how near I was to the truth and the solution that came to me long after that memorable meeting. For the moment I suffered the keen pangs of disillusionment, and sought to derive comfort from the hope that I might yet do some work that would be worthy of his praise, something that would win the approbation of his fine and delicate criticism.

“ What has Oscar been saying to make you look so sad ? ” said the voice of my guest, breaking in on my reverie.

“ Did you not hear what he said ? ” I answered.

“ No. I discreetly withdrew,” he replied.

Then I realised that I had not been aware of his absence, and I felt uncomfortably annoyed. “ And why discreetly ? ” I asked. “ I had nothing to

say that the whole table might not have heard."

"Of that I am aware," he said warmly. "But for certain reasons I chose to go and look up some of my old friends at the next table!"

"What reasons?" I persisted. "Did you not wish to be introduced, in case I chose to present you?"

"Oh, I know Oscar very well. I was a patient of his father, Sir William, who did me a great service in restoring the sight of my eyes that were injured in the Mutiny."

"Then why did you avoid the son of your benefactor; what grievance have you against his son?" I said with much heat.

"I have no grievance against Oscar, except that which every decent man feels in seeing another lay himself open to—well, censure."

"Censure, or no censure," I retorted hotly, "you should not have forgotten the fact that he is the son of the man who gave you back the use of your eyes."

"Perhaps you are right!" he answered quietly.

"You, a brave man," I continued with increased heat, "who risked your life for your country—and an Irishman at that, like Oscar Wilde—you

were not brave enough to risk the opinion of these people here, and say a kindly word of greeting to the son of your benefactor? Ah! I am ashamed of you!"

"You reason like a child!" he answered gently. "I am old enough to be your father, and am certainly capable of knowing the right thing to do, and it is *not* right to countenance the reckless conduct of the son of my old friend in braving public censure as he does! That was my reason for leaving the table when he addressed you."

"What had his addressing me to do with your leaving the table?" I asked in dismay; for it was the first I had heard of the rumours afloat.

"You don't understand. I had to avoid an awkward situation for your sake as well as mine."

"You would have snubbed him?" I asked.

"I am afraid I should!" he replied. "Don't ask me for any further explanation. I could not give you one."

He looked really grieved, and I did not persist, but my heart ached over that revelation of the shadow that had fallen on the name of the son of my dear and valued friend, Lady Wilde.

I understood now the reason for Oscar Wilde's

abrupt departure, and I felt somehow happy to know that he had not forgotten all I had done to win his approval, and that he was debarred from giving me a word of praise or encouragement by the action of my guest in giving him that unkind cut. I felt my eyes burn with a rush of tears to think I had inadvertently been the cause of pain to him. I regretted the invitation, given in a moment of sympathy, to the old soldier-author beside me. But for his presence I might have enjoyed a few moments of pleasure in the brilliant talk of Oscar Wilde, and also have avoided the painful explanation that my guest felt, no doubt, justified in giving me. Altogether, my evening was spoiled, and I longed to escape as soon as possible. But I was not yet through with the disagreeable results of poor Oscar Wilde's notice of me ; for a writer, utterly unknown to me save through piquant and vulgar satires on society foibles in the guise of novels, approached, and taking the vacant seat beside me, said with a gusto that won my instant dislike :—

“ May I ask the name of the lady that Oscar Wilde signalled out for his attention ? He did not deign to favour anyone else with even a bow of

recognition. You are no doubt very great friends."

"Yes, you are right. I am not only Oscar Wilde's friend, but proud to be his friend. If you wish to know my name, you will find it on the plan of the table." I pointed to the paper beside my glass.

"Oh! then you were his guest!" The little grey eyes glowed green with suppressed spite.

"No, Madame was not Oscar Wilde's guest," said my old soldier, rising and giving me his arm. "She is a member of the Society. Permit us to wish you good-night."

We left the discomfited writer to thoughts that were certainly not very pleasant after the snubbing of my old friend, who muttered under his breath: "That chase after copy has missed fire this time. Serves such people right!"

I was silent. I had not yet acquired the sang-froid, that came with years of experience in combatting the world, to forget the words of spite as soon as they are uttered. Therefore I was silent.

## VI

THE house of the soul is built of the atoms from innumerable ancestors, atoms that have survived the destruction of the body. Each atom is a heritage from those ancestors, and, like the colours on a painter's palette when blended together, form a new shade or a different colour from the original, just as violet and red blend into purple or blue and yellow into green. Hence there can be no truth in the theory of heredity, since, as each colour is a distinct hue or tone in itself, so likewise the house of the soul is a distinct structure in itself, completely independent and individual, with no obligations to its past ancestry or influence on the future distribution of the atoms in its composition. When the house is ready and the soul enters into possession, the house becomes a conscious exponent of the soul. A house of glass through which the soul shines brightly or dimly according to the disturbing influences from without or within; for the soul cannot render the house invulnerable, since the house



is mortal, and must perish to render up its debt to the future.

One of the first lessons that the soul teaches its new companion, the house of flesh, is this knowledge of its fate, this consciousness that their sojourn together is for a short time ; though the soul does not reveal the reasons thereof, for that is the secret of death. But the soul renders that companion a house of joy or sorrow, according to the capacity of that house of flesh for assisting or resisting the influence of the soul. From the very nature of its construction the house of the soul is a free agent through the seed of free-will implanted by the hand of God in every atom descended to it from its innumerable ancestors. But this free-will is not hereditary. It is the secret of life, of vitality, that makes of it a living, breathing body, but does not in any way fashion or influence its existence. That is the duty and prerogative of the soul. Hence there can be no hereditary vice or virtue, and Oscar Wilde owed his downfall and his victory to the battle of the soul for supremacy over the genius that would dispute its right to the house of the flesh. To this soul influence alone, and not to the influence of heredity, as a recent writer claims in his

eloquent and sympathetic life of Oscar Wilde, is due the tragedy and the triumph of Oscar Wilde's fame as a man and a genius.

The theory of heredity is a dangerous, and oft-times pernicious one, as it destroys the belief in hope and self-redemption. The example of the father is oft-times the redemption of the son, whereas the criminal who believes that he was foredoomed through prenatal influences, reconciles himself to a fate that he believes to be beyond his power to control, and continues to the end in his career of crime. Oscar Wilde would have been the first to deny the theory of heredity in his case, and, as he proved himself a brave man in facing the sentence imposed upon him and serving the full period of his punishment, so he would never have permitted the stigma of his sin to blacken the memory of his father and mother by attributing the cause of that sin to hereditary influences from either of his gifted and honourable parents. The conduct of Oscar Wilde amply justifies my belief in this assertion, which I make with all due respect for the motives of the writer, already mentioned as putting forth the plea of the theory of heredity. I make this argument to show that the battle was not between Oscar

Wilde and the forces of heredity, but between the soul and its house, the masculine brain building that constituted the genius of Oscar Wilde.

The great struggle had already begun when I met him at the Authors' dinner. The soul had retreated for the time, leaving the brain-house dazzled with the belief in its victory, a prey to all the forces of the flesh, the rioting of the senses, the surfeit of feasting, the gratification of every desire. Fame and fortune besieged the door of the house of flesh, and the tumult of their entrance drowned the still small voice of the sentinel of the soul, the voice of conscience.

Gradually the echoes of that struggle reached the outer world. The souls of men were mysteriously stirred. The stealthy note of public rumour crept into that symphony of triumph. The harmony was subtly broken by a note of discord, and, to restore it, Oscar Wilde created other and more brilliant themes to amuse and distract his public. Whispers of extraordinary artistic orgies were afloat, in which he figured as a demigod amid the adulation of his worshippers. Artists, actors, writers, the aristocracy of Bohemia composed the intellectual throng that gathered on one occasion in the studio of an

artist celebrated for his eccentric work in crayon, a genius whose paradoxes of the pencil equalled Oscar Wilde's paradoxes of the pen. The entertainment took the form of a Masque, in which the characters of his plays were represented in costume by the guests, the feature of the occasion being a realistic impersonation of Salome in the dance of death. This extraordinary and brilliant affair terminated in a grand march past the dais, where Oscar Wilde stood in one of his most characteristic poses, beaming with gratified pride on the charming procession, led by the artist-host who, bending the knee and kissing the hand of the creator of those characters, proclaimed Oscar Wilde "King of the Drama." If one considers the fact that, added to these, and other scenes of private triumph, were those nightly scenes at the theatre of the public tribute of fame and fortune to the work of Oscar Wilde, it is not a matter of marvel that all sense of his soul was lost in the absorbing sense of gratified pride and ambition, that he should even lose the consciousness of the power of the feminine soul, and bow down in worship before the shrine of that supreme genius of the masculine brain. It is not a matter of wonder that the swell of those poëms

of praise dulled the sound of the note of warning that underlay their triumphant chords, that the low murmur of the thunder of the approaching storm should have been lost to his unheeding ear, or the gathering clouds be invisible to his eyes, dazzled by the reflection of his own glory, that sun of glory that was to set in the darkness of disgrace, to rise again in the splendid light of the morn of redemption.

On the 14th of February, 1895, Oscar Wilde made his last bid for public favour by the production of "The Importance of Being Earnest," at the St. James's Theatre. Just as he had at the outset of his career donned the sunflower and the mantle of the æsthetic jester to further his object and attract the public to his views of art, he now donned the masque of joyous satire to hide from the world the secret of the loss of his soul, to win its condonation of the excesses of his genius, through the indulgence bred by the enjoyment of his wit. But the gratitude of the public is as fickle as its favour, for his very triumph was his undoing. It was a triumph that gave him a false sense of security whereby he sought to draw the teeth of the lion of public opinion in a Court of Justice, and felt those formidable jaws

crush the hand he had so recklessly placed within its terrible maw.

## VII

SUDDENLY the tide of rumour, that had been percolating society, burst into a flood of scandal, that at once appalled and startled all London, in the action taken by Oscar Wilde against the Marquess of Queensberry, for criminal libel. The ensuing notoriety swelled the receipts of the theatres where the plays of Oscar Wilde were being performed, while the author, sure of his victory, looked on in supreme content at the increased popularity of his works, brought about by the daring coup he had made to check the flood of scandal and assuage his conscience ; for that sentinel of the ambushed soul had begun its preliminary attack. There would be at last an end to the secret disquietude and wounded pride caused by the newspaper innuendoes, the society snubs, the open censure of friends and covert sneers of foes. He would draw the teeth of the lion, render its menacing jaws harmless, and continue unmolested in his career of arrogant indifference to its power.

Therefore, he drove in luxurious state to the Old Bailey, fully secure in the certainty that his splendid brougham and spirited horses would, like the chariot of a victorious gladiator, carry him on the return journey in triumph through the streets of London. But the moment of awakening to the knowledge of the power and vengeance of his outraged soul, awaited him in that temple of man's justice into which he entered with such bold confidence. That court, which was really a tribunal of souls, before which his own soul demanded that the house of flesh should be delivered up to the punishment that would be his redemption. When the forces of the soul are brought into full play against the forces of the brain-building, the result is inevitable. It is spiritual power conflicting the corporal power wherein the subtle force of suggestion becomes a deadly weapon in the employ of the soul. Suggestion, the most potent of all the forces of the soul, the source from which imagination, inspiration and thought derives its being. What electricity is to the universe of the visible world, suggestion is to the invisible domain of the spirit—a spark that sets aflame the knowledge that illuminates the darkness of the material mind. The twelve



men who represented the public mind, who held the scales of justice on behalf of the public at the tribunal to which Oscar Wilde had summoned the Marquis of Queensberry, also represented the great invisible soul of that public. The suffering soul of Oscar Wilde sent forth its plea in one flash of that terrible force, to those twelve souls, and all was changed. The accuser became the accused, and Oscar Wilde left the court a ruined man.

The soul had begun the battle for its rights to the house of its earthly tenement. But the splendid masculine brain building made a brilliant and powerful resistance. During the period of imprisonment Oscar Wilde recovered something of his normal condition. The light of his soul began to dimly illumine the terrible darkness of his downfall, but again the overmastering pride of his genius obscured it, and he groped valiantly to retain his hold on the fame and all those delectable pleasures with which the genius of his masculine brain had endowed him. He strove to guard his idol, to dazzle the mind of judge and jury by the splendour of his wit and eloquence. The battle was a fierce one and, at the first trial, the souls of the twelve men that were to judge him, wavered, lost the voice of that appeal of the

struggling spirit in the tumult of the battle of that masculine brain for supremacy. The jury disagreed. Oscar Wilde went forth on sufferance, a free man, but holding his freedom on that most fragile and dangerous bond, his own word of honour. And even this was a subterfuge of his soul, a deep intriguing subterfuge of that supreme feminine soul, a condition wrung from the souls of those twelve men by the force of the suggestion to prove Oscar Wilde worthy either of the great redemption awaiting him, or of the eternal oblivion into which he would descend as the slave of that unbridled brain frenzy induced by the strange idol at whose shrine he worshipped.

The soul held aloof during that time of probation waiting for some sign, some thought, some plea from Oscar Wilde. But he had forgotten his soul. He strove to forget, likewise that unsleeping sentinel of his soul, the conscience. The tribunal of man was even more merciful than that tribunal of the soul, since it gave him that period of probation on bail in which to prepare for the terrible ordeal before him, the humiliating ordeal of appearing as the accused instead of the accuser. His enemy had vanquished him, and by one of those strange

juggling feats of Fate he was caught in the very net that he had prepared for that enemy. Like two mighty wrestlers in the Roman arena, they stood forth, armed with the treacherous net in which the challenger was caught by the very skill of his daring, for it was through the play of his own wit and eloquence that Oscar Wilde over-reached himself and was hurled by the dexterous hand of Fate into the dock. During the period when he was out on bail poor Oscar had a foretaste of what the avenging soul had in store for him. Those enemies that masquerade in the guise of friends urged him to sacrifice the bond of the generous unknown, who had gone his bail, to break his word, trample on his honour, and fly where English justice could not touch him. Here again was a supreme test of his soul, but there was one other soul by the side of Oscar Wilde, the noble soul of his mother. Her influence prevailed, it was the armour that protected him, not only against those disguised enemies, but from himself.

The shadow that had fallen on the home in Oakley Street was indeed a heavy one. Who can think of that mother, wounded to the very core of her heart, yet bravely hiding her suffering in that divine

effort to save her son, herself believing to the bitter end in the innocence of that beloved son? It was a pathetic sorrow into which the sympathy of the most devoted friends dared not intrude, a sorrow more poignant than death, the grief over that death in life, the loss of honour that to the noble and upright is more precious than life itself. It was a mournful train of friends that went silently to the closed door of the house in Oakley Street to drop a word of tender enquiry or reassurance into the letter-box. A darkened house where, in her silent chamber, Lady Wilde fought with Fate for the soul of her son.

## VIII

ON the 22nd of May the second and final trial of Oscar Wilde began. It was a time of breathless expectancy for friends and foes alike. London was moved to the very depths of her social being, from high to low a thrill of fear spread as when the earth trembles before the shock of earthquake. The myriad souls in the vast city were seized with a sort of unspeakable terror in the face of the peril that threatened, not only the soul of Oscar Wilde, but each individual soul according to its merits. It was like the writing on the great invisible wall that separates mind and matter, a writing that made that wall visible, and showed men the peril of incurring the vengeance of the soul ; the appalling truth of the still greater vengeance of God that worked so slowly and surely.

It seems, as I write, but yesterday, that day of lovely May, when the beautiful spirit of springtime breathed on shrub and tree waking into life blossom

and leaf, gilding the streets with sunshine and filling the dusky air with perfume ; that lovely day when, moved by a restless feeling of foreboding, I sought the Temple gardens, to await the news of the verdict that would decide the fate of the son of my dear friend, Lady Wilde. I sat down on one of the garden seats. The tinkling sound of the falling waters of the fountain near by, the twittering of the birds, the soft voices of children laughing in their play, made the air musical. It seemed impossible that, not far distant from that smiling and peaceful spot in the heart of London, a man and a poet who loved all that simple joy of life, the sunshine, birds, children, flowers and fragrance, should be in the dock awaiting the sentence that would banish him from the sweet light and freedom of day—condemn him to live between the gray walls of a prison with only that “tent of blue” to cheer the solitude and silence of that death in life. As these sad thoughts flashed through my mind I gradually became conscious of measured footsteps passing slowly to and fro beyond the secluded spot where I sat. The reiteration of those heavy steps impressed me strangely. At that hour the gardens were deserted, and those heavy steps echoed so loudly, that I grew

oppressed by the sound, and arose to leave the gardens. Then I saw for the first time the form of the man whose pacing to and fro had disturbed me. His back was turned, and I noticed the dejected droop of his shoulders, the hands clasped behind his back, and the weary attitude of the tall, powerful figure. I felt unaccountably sad for that stranger so lonely and dejected amid the smiling garden. As he turned to retrace his steps I recognised him. It was Willie, the brother of Oscar Wilde. My first impulse was to turn and escape before he perceived me. I felt that I could not intrude on the sacred privacy of that man battling with his sorrow. But he had seen me, and, hastening his steps, joined me with a little exclamation of surprise and greeting :—

“ Ah ! Contessa ! ” he said, holding forth his hand, “ how glad I am to meet you ! ”

I took his hand silently. My emotion was too great. I could have wept, and to control myself kept my lips pressed hard to keep back the voice that would break into a sob if I opened them.

He held my hand and regarded me in silence. I noted the pallor of his face, and the eyes red with the tears that had fallen during that walk, while

he struggled to master his grief. I returned his gaze mutely.

"You, also, are waiting!" he said hoarsely. "It is good of you, Contessa—but don't worry. Oscar is sure to be acquitted."

"How is Lady Wilde?" I ventured to ask, wishing to distract his attention from the sad subject.

"Mother is bearing up bravely—she hopes for the best. It was so good of you to call, but she cannot see any one, no matter how dear a friend—you understand."

"I understand!" was my low response.

"My brother!" he cried brokenly. "My brother! God help me. God alone be his judge."

We paced the gardens together, while he poured forth his grief in incoherent words. I cannot remember what he said, for my soul was full of a wordless prayer, and my mind so overwrought by the spectacle of that strong man weeping over his brother, that all he said has passed from my memory like a dream.

Presently he grew calmer, and with words of thanks he left me, saying:—

"Oscar will need me when the verdict is given. I must take care of my poor brother—for, one way



or another, he will be a wreck after this terrible business ! ” I watched him leave the gardens and walk quickly in the direction of the Old Bailey.

I resumed my seat. It seemed unbearable to return to my hotel. I felt I could not endure to be between four walls. I craved the open air and the view of the sky, the warm, sweet wind from the gardens ; my soul longed for comfort of spiritual communion, it seemed that only the realisation of God's presence could help to ease the misery of heart and mind into which the interview with that afflicted soul who had just left me, had plunged my spirit. I sat there until the sun set over the river beyond the gardens. Until sky and water were bathed in the gold and rose light of the after-glow. Then I left the seat in the garden and joined the throng passing towards the street. I knew by that time all was over—that Oscar Wilde was free or doomed to imprisonment. I shuddered and hurried on until I was in the midst of the crowd of people flowing through that mighty artery of London's heart, the Strand. I heard the wild yell of the newsvendors, and, accustomed as I was to the clamour of those boys, I knew by their strident cries that they were proclaiming news items of

more than passing interest. I could distinguish the word—verdict—rolled out in every conceivable cockney accent. Some of the boys flaunted their papers in my face in their eagerness to sell the delectable tit-bit of sensational scandal. I turned away and sought a quieter thoroughfare. My way lay through Pall Mall and up St. James's Street. I made a *détour* and passed through King Street, and without realizing it found myself before the St. James's Theatre. I gazed at the building with its classic white portico ; there was a queer sensation at my heart—poor Oscar—it was the scene of his first and last triumph. My eyes sought the poster that usually hung before the doors, announcing his play. It was not there, but instead was rudely attached to the railings of the entrance of the Theatre, a huge, glaring yellow poster, bearing in startling black lettering, the words :—

OSCAR WILDE.

VERDICT

GUILTY !

SENTENCE

TWO YEARS HARD LABOUR.



## BOOK III

### I

THE soul of Oscar Wilde had triumphed. From that eclipse of fame he was destined to emerge with a brightness that deepened with time, until the whole world was dazzled by the light of his genius. To those who mourned the death-in-life of his sojourn in prison, there was a keen, inexpressible joy in the passing of that eclipse, the realization that their faith in him had not been in vain, that his soul had won the victory over the flesh, that his genius arose with renewed strength, beauty and purity out of those depths of suffering and gave to the world the crowning master-piece of his pen in "De Profundis," But, before all this was realized there was a period of still greater suffering to follow his punishment by the hand of the law, ere that eloquent plea of his soul was to burst like a new star in the darkness hanging over his fame, and that was the punishment he was to endure at

the hands of Society. With the most relentless cruelty, the blind forces of humankind against the victim, which it makes suffer for its own secret sin, were let loose from the leash of justice and fell like dogs upon their quarry, to worry that victim to death.

Within his prison walls Oscar Wilde was sacred. The tongues of scandal, hatred and obloquy were stilled. His name was obliterated from his works, his existence wiped out, the world thought it had done with him and it left him in peace. The world little counted on the resurrection of his genius, little thought that it would one day praise where it had condemned, and honour where it had despised.

The punishment meted out to Oscar Wilde was one of the most terrible examples in history of the fear of the soul that is inborn in every human being. Not since the tragedies of Socrates and Plato had such an example of the brutal cruelty, inspired by secret terror of itself, been shown by humanity, never before so appalling a struggle between the soul and the brain-structure. The victim offered up on the altar of public opinion by London as a sacrifice to appease its own secret conscience, was stripped of every thing that the human heart holds

dear—home, wife, children—even his name obliterated from his work and cast aside by his wife and children, who were obliged to change that name in order to escape the cruel and unjust scorn to which they were subjected. His two innocent children were sent away from the school at which they were boarding through the fear of monetary loss, as the parents of other pupils threatened to withdraw their children, should the children of Oscar Wilde be permitted to remain. Constance Wilde fled to Italy where she died in April, 1898, eleven months after his release. She corresponded with, but never saw her husband after the visit to Reading, described in "*De Profundis*." Lady Wilde passed away during the imprisonment of her beloved son. The beautiful home in Tite Street was beset by the vultures of the law and dismantled, its treasures sold by that voracious horde of creditors, and, what was not legally theirs to seize, the manuscripts of Oscar Wilde's unpublished work, were stolen or destroyed and scattered over the floors to be swept up to garnish the dust-heap. The home in Tite Street was left to the darkness, the silence and desolation of its unhappy master's disgrace. Can anything be imagined more terrible than the silence of the voice

of love and friendship, for those who loved Oscar Wilde were mute and helpless, bound and gagged by the blind rage of public obloquy. And the few who were his friends, were likewise silent and powerless to defend or aid him. But the few true friends never lost their faith in the resurrection of his genius, the hope that he would emerge from that cloud a better man and a brighter genius than ever. Adversity and disgrace are like a sieve in the hand of Fate, who sifts the grains of friendship until the chaff disappears in dust and only the good remains. And there were not a few friends left in that sieve to comfort the unhappy man by their prayers and unspoken sympathy.

I recall an incident that will give some little idea of the public opprobrium dealt out to, not only Oscar Wilde, but to his family, even after Oscar had expiated his sin and was released from prison. I was lunching at a fashionable restaurant in Piccadilly when the general manager came to my table and begged to have a word with me in private. I excused myself to my friends and withdrew with him to his office.

"You will pardon my disturbing you," he began, "but I am in a most unpleasant predicament. I

have been asked to request a gentleman and lady to leave the restaurant. Now, as you know everyone in the newspaper world, and those people who write books, I have been asked by the proprietor to consult you in this matter. The person, whom we have been requested to eject is Oscar Wilde, and as I don't know the man, having never seen him, I don't want to make a mistake, so I must appeal to you—do you know him ? ”

“ Yes,” I replied. “ I know Oscar Wilde and his family very well ! ”

“ Would you mind identifying him ? ”

“ Certainly not,” I answered.

“ Then would you kindly come with me and I will point out to you the man in question.

We left the room by a private door and passed along a gallery giving a view of the restaurant.

“ There he sits, at the small table at the top of the middle row ! ” said the manager, pointing in the direction. I looked across the wide room, and then, turning to him, said, somewhat sternly.

“ That is not Mr. Oscar Wilde, it is his brother, Mr. Willie Wilde ! ”

“ Oh, thank you very much ! ” cried the manager



in a tone of relief. "It would have been most awkward to have made such a mistake."

"It would indeed have been an awkward mistake," I replied, as a vision of the muscular proof that Willie would, no doubt, have given of his indignation had the manager not taken the precaution to identify him rose before me.

After the luncheon I waited in the foyer to greet Willie Wilde, as I had a presentiment that the manager was not altogether easy about the matter, and I took that opportunity of introducing him to Willie in order that the identification would be complete. The lady who accompanied him was his wife, a charming and beautiful Irish girl, and both were in the most happy spirits over the release of Oscar and full of hope for his future.

"Have you read Oscar's exposé of the prison abuses?" he asked me. "No? then you must lose no time and read the article. The sufferings of my brother will not be in vain if his eloquent article accomplishes the end for which he wrote it! Oscar has come out of prison a greater man than ever; his 'Ballad of Reading Gaol' will immortalize him!"

I listened to this fraternal pæan with genuine pleasure. I believed all he said, for I, too, had

faith in the future of that genius redeemed by the chastening hand of his great feminine soul.

The sudden death of Willie Wilde occurred not long after. His heart was broken through stress of sorrow and the bitter grief over the malignant fate that followed his family, and there were, no doubt, many such humiliations, as that one which I had spared him, heaped upon his innocent head by the strange and relentless hatred that outlived the expiation of his unhappy brother."

## II

THE mystery of the soul is as unfathomable as the mystery of the creation. The brain building to which the soul is assigned, exists really by the will of the soul. If that fleshy structure is unworthy of the soul, the soul destroys it, and this is death. But the immortality of the work of that brain structure, the human intelligence, depends on its capability to render the soul happy during its sojourn within that house of the flesh. Sin, pain, madness, illness, are all weapons by which the soul seeks to destroy the bonds that hold it to life, and thereby effect its escape. The proof of this is the annihilation of the body after the soul has departed, an annihilation so terrible and loathsome, that, not even the most powerful sentiment of the human heart, that sentiment of love, can withstand or conquer the repugnance bred in the senses by that annihilation of the body which had once fed those senses with delight and joy. The once beautiful

house of the soul, the wonderful living flesh that in itself is a masterpiece of nature, and therefore intrinsically beautiful according to the laws of nature, no matter what might be the law of art or human vanity, is thrust out of sight, burned in the purifying fire, or buried in the sweet forgetfulness of the bosom of Mother earth. As I wrote, when quoting the immortal words of the Bible, Oscar Wilde did not lose his soul, but that soul withdrew and left him to the mercy of his genius. The soul loves the genius of man as it also loves the purity, the beauty and the nobility of its house of flesh. The soul loves a clean and wholesome dwelling, but when the intelligence or the senses seek to degrade that house, to fill it with the bad odour of excess and pollute it by indulgence in acts against the law of the soul, at once disorder reigns, the peace of mind which the human heart prizes so highly is gone, the body left to its own devices descends to the level of the brute, although its outward appearance may be all that humankind loves and worships. With genius the soul is more in accord, since genius is a quality more nearly perfect than any other quality of the brain structure. Just as that which is called timbre is the quality

that renders the voice beautiful and soulful, genius is the timbre of the intellect, that likewise renders thought soulful and beautiful, no matter in what direction the genius of thought trends—be it science, art, literature, or mechanics, it is the one perfect thing in the intellectual life, and therefore the delight of the soul. Just as we delight in the pictures, the flowers, the music and all the things that go to make the life of the fleshly house joyous, so the soul revels in the pleasures afforded it by the genius of the brain-building.

The soul loved the genius of Oscar Wilde. The soul wished the fruit of his genius to live, and therefore spared that splendid masculine brain structure until the regeneration of brain and body was accomplished. When Oscar Wilde entered the gates of prison, he was stripped of everything; honour, riches, fame, wife, children, mother—all was taken from him, but his soul was with him; no human tribunal, no human vengeance could separate him from his soul. The world would have destroyed that soul, had it been in its power to do so; but God, more merciful than the mercy of men, more powerful for the right than the power that men call justice, permitted the soul to work out the salvation

of the man of genius lost through the unbridled forces of his masculine brain being.

The soul of Oscar Wilde followed him, and there in the darkness and inexpressible misery of that death-in-life, Oscar Wilde at last found his soul, found it waiting for him, met it face to face and understood for the first time, the beauty, the tenderness, the love of that noble feminine soul.

A wonderful peace descended upon him, blotting out like a silver mist, the terrible retrospective of the past; the madness of the flesh disappeared like the wraiths of the dawn before the rising of the sun of that new day of righteousness. He slipped from the sway of the senses, as one slips from a garment, to bathe his genius in the waters of redemption, so gently poured over him by the hand of his soul. His eyes were cleared, his lips cleansed, and his heart refreshed by those waters. He was at peace with all the world, the higher love had entered his breast, and the greater light illumined his genius, and, to crown all, the soul bestowed upon him the priceless gift of resignation. His soul became mother, wife, child, friend to him, and peopled the solitude of his cell with the noble, the famous, and the beautiful of the world of thought. Those

visions are recorded in the letters to his faithful and devoted friend, Robert Ross, that have become immortal in the pages of "De Profundis." It is the soul of Oscar Wilde that breathes in every line of that pathetic masterpiece. The great feminine soul, the mother soul of the world. The soul that revealed to him the spirit of Christ, that divine spirit that is above all dogmas, all creeds and all ecclesiasticism, the spirit of Christ clothed in the light of humility and charity, and crowned with the painless crown of peace.

His life in prison was like a flower of repentance; he watered it with his tears, and the sunshine within his heart made it bloom until its atmosphere uplifted the hearts of his gaolers and fellow prisoners by the influence of its freshness and sweetness. Men felt the presence of the soul of Oscar Wilde through that fragrance, as one feels the soul of the lily through its perfume.

In Sherard's "Life of Oscar Wilde," there is a chapter entitled "The Poet in Prison." In all that noble work there is not a more touching chapter. It is a tribute from one of his gaolers to the lofty and saintlike spirit of Oscar Wilde during his life in that house of bondage, and is a living testament of

the influence of that invisible presence, the soul, on Oscar Wilde from the hand of one who knew and watched his most secret act. It is told with a simplicity that vouches for its truthfulness, and carries a conviction that the man of whom his gaoler writes "While in prison he lived the life of a saint," was indeed at peace with God and his soul in that life-in-death—that purgatory of human justice that is called prison. It was in May, 1897, the month of Nature's beautiful awakening from the trance of Spring, that Oscar Wilde was released from Reading Gaol. The earth seemed wreathed in blossoms to greet him, for a love of flowers had ever been a passion with him, and one of the most pathetic incidents of his prison life was the privilege accorded him of working as gardener in the prison gardens. How easy it is to understand the joy that filled the weary eye of the poet when he once more beheld the beauty of flower, leaf and tree, sky and sea!

Oscar left England at once to avoid the possibility of what he knew was in store for him at the hands of that cruel world, that forgets not, though it may forgive.

The shores of France held a welcome for him, but could not give him the peace he sought.



As he so pititully wrote in the letters that were to crown his fame with immortality after he had passed into the land of eternal peace :

“ It was always springtime in my heart.” .

But now there was no longer springtime on earth for that sore heart crushed by sorrow, suffering and repentance, because, his soul sought to wean him from that intense love of life, and jealousy drew a veil between him and the world.

There was no mother, wife or child to greet him—only the one faithful friend, who, with all his devotion, could not take the place of mother or wife. Therefore, Oscar went forth alone with only his soul to comfort him into the wilderness of the world. His suffering began anew, the weary calvary stretched before him, whereon he was to carry his cross until he laid it down at the feet of God. Many times he stumbled, perhaps, but the great feminine soul was there to guard him from falling again into the pit of infamy from which he had struggled through the suffering of expiation.

It has been said that Oscar Wilde did not work after his release because he had no audience, no stimulant for his inspiration through the loss of the world's praise and admiration. This is an error,

very natural to those who look only along the surface of his life. It was his soul that withdrew the dangerous cup of inspiration from his lips, his soul that taught him the emptiness of worldly fame, and his soul that knew the victory awaiting his genius when the brain building would be no more than a handful of dust in its bony structure, when the flesh would have vanished and only the name of Oscar Wilde remain to grace the imperishable scroll of fame through the record of that communion with his soul that he has bequeathed to the world in the "De Profundis." Only the great feminine soul knew the future of that matchless work, the feminine soul that watched over him with the solicitude of the Eternal Mother during those few years of petty freedom, until the great freedom of Eternity dawned for him in the sad little chamber in the Rue des Beaux-Arts.

### III

THE autumn of the year of the great Paris Exhibition I passed in Paris in order to explore its wonders at my leisure. During the month of August I was the guest of an American friend, whose only interest in the Exhibition consisted in viewing the illuminations and enjoying the dinners at the famous cafés. One night she gave a dinner party at the Spanish café. The feature of the place was the exhibition of Spanish dances given on a small stage erected at one end of the restaurant. Seats were provided for those who wished to enjoy the representation without dining, while for the diners, tables were arranged in alcoves behind the seats where a good view of the stage was offered. We were a party of eight, including the sons of the hostess. During the dinner my attention strayed often to the music and the very characteristic dances of the performers on the gaudy little stage. I found the pose of the principal danseuse more interesting than the menu, despite its *recherché* character, and, when I should have been enjoying a particularly

choice soufflé, I was lost in a delightful reverie over the haunting motif of the dance music. My hostess had grown weary of chiding me for neglecting the dinner, and left me to my reveries. By some strange coincidence my thoughts wandered to Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, suggested, no doubt, by the semi-barbaric fierceness of that old Spanish dance with its grotesque attitudes and passionate expression of hatred and love, jealousy and vengeance portrayed by the pantomime of the dancer. The sad minor chords of the music awakened memories of the unhappy author of *Salome*. Where was he? What had become of Oscar Wilde? I let my gaze roam across the small auditorium, and, suddenly, to my intense surprise, I saw him advancing slowly along the entrance of the café. He was greatly changed, had grown very stout, and the rich waves of hair had given place to a close-cut coiffure that seemed to accentuate the coarseness of his face. A small white straw hat added to the grotesque outline of his once beautiful head. He was clad in a suit of grey tweed, the short coat increasing the heavy lines of his figure and giving an impression of overweight to the upper part of his body. Every vestige of the dandy had disappeared. His eyes were

heavy and the pallor of the skin added to the look of ill-health despite his robust figure. I caught my breath in surprise. It seemed incredible that it was really Oscar Wilde who was coming towards me with such slow ponderous steps. I saw that he was not alone ; the faithful friend accompanied him. They both stopped to survey the room in search of seats, and had evidently come to see the dances. I half rose to meet him and just as I did so he turned and looked in another direction. Then it flashed upon me that the meeting might be an awkward one before my friends. They were society people and might resent the encounter. I felt hot and cold with nervous anxiety. I could not snub the son of my dear friend, Lady Wilde, neither could I expose him to the cruel test of being received coldly or insultingly by my hostess, who was an American with all the prejudices and insolent pride of her class towards those who had descended the social ladder. In my dilemma I raised my fan to shield my face and held it there until I heard his footsteps recede as he walked slowly past our table.

“ Why do you hold your fan to your face ? ” enquired my hostess.

I lowered the fan and glancing over my shoulder

saw that Oscar Wilde and his companion had taken seats by the stage, near the orchestra. I made some excuse about the light hurting my eyes, but my hostess was not deceived.

“ You wished to avoid seeing someone,” she cried.  
“ Tell me who it was ? ”

I knew it would be useless to prevaricate as she would have given me no peace in her curiosity. Therefore I thought it best to tell her.

“ It was a friend, a son of a very old and dear friend whom I did not wish to greet, as I happen not to be alone.”

“ Tell me, who was it, and why did you not wish to speak to him—tell me who is this friend.” She spoke with some heat and, being her guest, I could not very well refuse to tell her.

“ It was Mr. Oscar Wilde ! ” I answered, whereupon ensued a perfect hubbub of exclamations, an exhibition of vulgar curiosity that aroused my secret indignation and convinced me of the wisdom of my act in avoiding the meeting.

“ Where is he—point him out,” they cried, much as they would have clamoured to see some monstrosity, but knowing that my poor friend was well hidden in the crowded seats around the stage I

directed their attention towards the entrance, where I told them quite truthfully I had seen him standing. There was a craning of necks towards the great doors of the café, and some of the party mounted their chairs to search for him amid the audience. Needless to relate, I had no further appetite for dinner that evening.

When the dinner was at an end and we were driving home, my hostess observed

“ You showed great tact in avoiding that meeting, but all the same I should not have been offended if you had spoken to him, as I was curious to see what sort of a monster he really is.”

I made no reply, my heart was too full and my soul too sad for words.

#### IV

A THUNDER storm swept over Paris that night. The electric wave cleared the air and brought an exquisite dawn, fresh and rosy with just a touch of coldness in its breath that was highly welcome to sun-baked, dusty Paris. I rose early after a restless night, full of thoughts of the past evoked by the scene in the Spanish café, my nerves were overstrung by too great an indulgence in retrospect and the tears that had kept me company through that long night of sorrowing over the unhappy fate of the son of my dear friend. I longed for the solitude of the open air ; the room seemed peopled with a crowd of memories ; I breakfasted and left the house quickly. It was very early. The streets were still and empty. I turned into the Champs Elysées, and strolled towards the river until I reached the Pont de la Concorde. The faint, pearly mists still hung over the waters, glimmering in the delicate glow of the sun shining through the veil of haze. The noble silhouette of the Palais



Bourbon arose in dreamlike beauty from the mist, while afar the Eiffel Tower loomed up in all the grace of its ghostly outlines. The soft breeze hovering over the river seemed to woo me by its promise of an hour or so of enjoyment, on its cool waterway, before the torrid heat of the day had settled over Paris. I decided to take a trip in one of the flag-decked little steamers already skimming to and fro on the smooth tide. I caught a *bateau-mouche*, as the Parisians style those quaint water craft, at the little barge that forms the ferry house on the other side of the bridge for passengers going in the direction of St. Cloud. The boat was practically empty, save for a few idlers, like myself, in search of fresh air and quiet. I took a seat where I could have an unobstructed view of the river and the lovely scenery on either side. The gently gliding motion of the boat, the soft fragrant air, the dreamlike beauty of the magnificent buildings of the Exhibition and the absolute quiet around me, accentuated by the soft swish of the waters parting under the bows of the boat, soothed and uplifted my spirit. I was in a land of visions that gently passed like cloud pictures along the shore as

the boat carried me through that wonderland of beautiful structures until the shores dissolved into the verdure of blooming and leafy banks where white villas, glistening like stars in the sunshine, peeped from the mass of green. Paris lay behind me, wrapt in her garment of sunlit mists.

The little bateau-mouche was nearing the picturesque heights of St. Cloud, when I awoke from my day-dreams to realize that someone was speaking to me. I was so completely under the lulling influence of the peace and beauty of the scene that I felt no annoyance at the awakening. It seemed, that amid those perfect surroundings, on that perfect river, nothing could break that harmony of repose and beauty : not even the presence of a stranger could disturb that ideal morning sail on the smooth emerald waters of the picturesque Seine. A voice very low, yet distinct in its rich quality was addressing me. I raised my eyes to assure myself that I was not still dreaming, since it seemed impossible that the owner of that unforgettable voice could be there, beside me, on the bench where I sat on the deck of the boat. But there could be no doubt, it was Oscar Wilde upon whom I gazed in astonishment.

“ Good morning,” he was saying, “ are you surprised to see me?—Surely not—You are not the only restless spirit in this great Paris. I, too, rose early to seek solace from these beautiful waters and the repose denied me in my stuffy hotel.”

He sank on the seat, and leaning back with a sigh of comfort removed his ugly little white straw hat to enjoy the air more fully.

Somehow, my amazement melted into a feeling of reality under his natural manner; it seemed that there was nothing strange in that meeting. It was quite natural that he also should seek the pleasure of a sail up the river on that lovely morning. I was filled with a sense of thankfulness at the lucky fate that had guided my steps to that particular boat, for now I could say all that was in my soul and open my heart to my poor friend, show him the deep sympathy and high regard that had survived all the evil that the world had heaped upon his unhappy head. I sought for words to explain in the most delicate way my apparent avoidance of him the night before, but he relieved me of the difficult duty.

“ I saw you last evening and, believe me Contessa, I was inexpressibly glad, and would have come to

you, but I don't care to meet strangers. Had you been alone it would have been a great pleasure to talk with you over the past," he paused and sighed. "I see so few of my old friends now, and when I do, the meeting is too much for me. I passed a sleepless night—a night of watching—and——" He paused.

"I, too, watched and prayed through the night," I hastened to say in answer to his unfinished sentence.

"Thank you," he replied simply. I waited for him to speak; there was something indefinable about him that impressed me more than all his former charm and elegance. An atmosphere of spirituality that shone through his changed appearance like the glitter of gold that has been through the refiner's furnace. I felt that he had indeed been refined through suffering.

After an interval, during which we both watched the gliding shores, our souls filled with reminiscent thoughts, he spoke again.

"I have lived—yes—I have lived," he said musingly. "I have lived all there was to live. Life held to my lips a full flavoured cup, and I drank it to the dregs—the bitter and the sweet. I found

the sweet bitter, and the bitter, sweet—yes, I have lived.”

Again he paused. I was silent. What word had I in answer to that mournful admission—could I probe the sorrows of that suffering heart? No! Therefore I waited in silence, forbearing to ask questions, as one who understood him less would have done.

Then his mood changed. With a smile as wan as moonlight breaking through the shadows he looked at me and began to speak of ordinary things, the weather, the Exhibition and books. Finally I ventured to ask a question.

“Why do you not write now?” I said, feeling how inane a question it really was, how almost impertinent in the face of his broken career, his helplessness.

“Because I have written all there was to write. I wrote when I did not know life, now that I do know the meaning of life, I have no more to write; life cannot be written, life can only be lived. I have lived.”

The reiteration of that phrase sank into my heart like the tolling of a bell. It seemed to knell the passing of a soul.

"I have no time to write—if I willed. My time is short—my work is done—and when I cease to live, that work will begin to live. Ah! my work will live as long as men live to read it; my work will be my great monument!"

His face glowed with the enthusiasm of that prophecy. Then his mood again changed and with an air of mystery, he said:

"Would you know my secret? I will tell you—and the river," pointing to the smooth waves now glittering with the gold of the fully risen sun.

"I have found my soul. I was happy in prison." He said the word softly, reverently. "I was happy there because I found my soul. What I wrote before I wrote without a soul, and what I have written under the guidance of my soul, the world shall one day read, it shall be the message of my soul to the souls of men!"

Again there was a pause. The revelation of that solemn moment was overpowering. I closed my eyes and pressed my hands to them to keep back the tears of real joy that filled my heart. God had been indeed merciful, God had rewarded that stricken genius beyond the power of man—yes, God was Good. God had given him back his soul.

“Contessa,” he said. “Don’t sorrow for me, but watch and pray—it will not be for long—watch and pray.”

His voice sank into silence. There was a long pause, broken only by the grating sound of the boat as it touched the landing pier. I strove to compose myself and waited for him to speak. Then I uncovered my face and turned to look at him—but he was gone.

## V

THREE months later, on a raw, sad-coloured November day I hastened to the hotel where Oscar Wilde lay dying. The news of his illness had only reached me that morning. From the short but pathetic account of his circumstances in *Le Journal*, I learned that he was alone and in actual distress. It was the first intimation I had of his whereabouts. I drove to the address, 13, Rue des Beaux Arts—ominous number—with all possible speed, my heart full of forebodings and keen self reproach for my neglect in not looking him up before, while I tried to console myself with the thought that it was not too late to be of some service to him. When I found myself in the short narrow street that derives its name from its immediate vicinity to the Ecole des Beaux Arts in the Rue Bonaparte, I descended before a modest building of four stories, the entrance of which was painted green, by some strange coincidence, a light “shrill green,” Oscar’s favourite colour, and bearing in yellow lettering the sign—*“Hotel d’ Alsace.”*



When I asked to be shown to the chamber of Monsieur Wilde, I was politely informed that no person of that name was in residence there. Then I bethought me of the pseudonym under which Oscar Wilde sought to hide his identity.

“Monsieur Sebastian Melmoth—is he here? I asked.

The concierge looked at me with curious interest and invited me to come into the bureau, or office, of the establishment, while she made enquiries. There was a mysterious air about that old hotel in the Rue des Beaux Arts that would have appealed to the eccentric imagination of Poe himself, and I could fancy how it must have been in accord with the melancholy and morbid mood that had induced Oscar Wilde to select it as his abode. It was truly a place to hide oneself in, the last spot where one would have looked for the once brilliant author of the “Importance of being Earnest,” although it was a fitting dwelling place for the unhappy poet of the “Ballad of Reading Gaol.” I followed the concierge through the narrow, dark entrance hall into a small room overlooking a court from which the light filtered dimly. The room seemed to be full of men discussing in subdued voices. I felt nervous

and somewhat embarrassed to find myself among all those strange men whom I could scarcely see and only vaguely understand what they were saying in excited French.

"Does anyone speak English here?" I demanded with an air of assurance that I was far from feeling.

"I do, Madame," answered a voice. "What can I do for you."

The speaker left the group of men discussing over a table covered with papers and documents, and advanced towards me. Then I recognised him as one of the friends who accompanied Oscar Wilde at the dinner of the Authors' Society.

"You are a friend of Mr. Wilde," I said, hurriedly. "I have just heard of his illness. I am a friend of his mother, the late Lady Wilde. Can I do anything for him? Will you take me to him?"

"Kindly come this way," answered Robert Ross, for it was that faithful friend of the unhappy poet to whom I was speaking.

I followed him out of the close little office into the curious court, lit from above by a skylight. There was a well to the left, into which the narrow staircase was built. He paused and looked at me

a moment before speaking. I felt my heart sink with foreboding.

"Oscar has just gone!" he said, very gently and solemnly.

I made the sign of the cross and bowed my head, overcome by the realization of my fears.

"He passed away at two o'clock," continued Ross, in a broken voice, "very peacefully. It may comfort you to know that he was received into the Roman Catholic Church four days ago. He was baptised by Father Dunn!"

"It is indeed a comfort," I replied, "to learn that God had not forsaken him, that he was granted that supreme grace. Thank God!"

"Will you come to see him now?"

I bowed my assent, and followed Mr. Ross up the three long flights of that dark narrow staircase, to the landing that led to the small back room where Oscar Wilde had breathed his last sigh in farewell to the world that had used him so cruelly. As I groped my way through the dark corridor, guided by the faint light from the open door, Mr. Ross took my hand and led me into the death chamber.

At the time of writing this memoir it is ten years since that gloomy November day, and yet the

impression made upon me by the scene in that dark little room is as vivid as though it happened but yesterday..

Oscar Wilde seemed wrapped in slumber. The coarseness that of late years marred his features had been refined by the invisible hand of death. The beauty of his youth had returned, while his striking likeness to the face of his mother smote my heart with a pang of remembrance. I could not realize that it was her dear and gifted son that lay there dead in the dingy back room of an obscure hotel, I could not realise that this was the end of his brilliant life, his love of luxury, his cult of the beautiful, his wit, his genius—all swallowed up in the squalor and darkness of that desolate room. A great wave of anguish swept over me. He was indeed gone, the world had triumphed—he was dead. Crushed by the miseries thrust upon him by the world that he had once filled with joyousness and laughter.

## VI

LATER on I heard many sad details of the illness and passing of Oscar Wilde, some of which were too sacred to record here. The immediate cause of his death was a cerebral inflammation brought on by an attack of influenza, but the remote cause was due to privation, grief and all the excesses misfortune brings in its train. That he struggled bravely to be resigned and make the best of his life was true, the most simple pleasures sufficed to cheer him, a chat with a friend over their coffee in his favourite café, a stroll through the historic quarter of Paris in which he lived, and only a month previous he had been made exceedingly happy by a visit from his brother Willie's widow, who had married again and come with her husband to see the great Paris Exhibition. They passed a delightful day with him, "the happiest that he had known since the shadow fell upon him," he pathetically declared to his friend Robbie, as he affectionately called Mr. Ross, who, when Oscar's illness took an alarming turn,

was summoned by telegram from Nice, too late to save him, it is true, but in time to watch over his last moments and bring to his soul the consecration and peace of the Holy Church, as well as to guard his interests and save what little he possessed from the fate that had overtaken the home in Tite Street. He said that Oscar was deeply in debt to the hotel and there were threats of sending the body to the Morgue, if the bill, amounting to some thousands of francs, was not settled. The danger of that last indignity to the remains of the poet was averted by the offer of the priest to give it sanctuary in the church until the burial, in case such measures were resorted to by the proprietor of the hotel.

"But," said Mr. Ross, in conclusion, "I have an answer to my telegram, from Lord Alfred Douglas in Scotland, to say he will be here to-night; I hope all will be paid by Lord Alfred, and the funeral will take place on Monday morning from the Church of St. Germain des Près, where a requiem Mass will be said over the remains of Oscar at 9 o'clock and the burial take place in the cemetery at Bagneux."

Nevertheless, my mind was not at ease over the danger of that threatened indignity to the remains in case some unforeseen circumstances delayed the

arrival of Lord Alfred Douglas, and I implored Mr. Ross to let me know in case there was any trouble and I would assist him to settle the debt, and thereby avert the last disgrace that a malevolent fate would have inflicted on that poor helpless body to the exultation of Oscar Wilde's enemies.

## VII

AND now I have come to the last scene in the life drama of Oscar Wilde. . . .

It was infinitely touching in its simplicity, and impressive through the beautiful burial ritual of the Catholic Church. To Robert Ross, Reginald Turner, and Lord Alfred Douglas is due the honour of making that closing scene worthy of the fame of the dead poet and their cherished friend. Mr. Ross purchased the grave in Bagneux Cemetery. On Monday morning at nine o'clock the funeral cortege left the old house in the Rue des Beaux Arts and slowly wended its way through the gloom of that cold November day, along the Rue Bonaparte, which leads to the historic church of St. Germain des Près, where William, Earl of Douglas was interred in 1811 and James, Duke of Douglas, in 1645, and where the ashes of the poet Boileau and Casimir, King of Poland rest under their time worn monuments.



The hearse, with its simple black and silver draperies, and drawn by black caparisoned horses, was converted into a floral car by the magnificent wreaths of lilies, orchids and roses with which it was laden.

Immediately behind this beautiful funeral car walked a company of some fifty or more people representing various literary and artistic societies. Lord Alfred Douglas, Mr. Robert Ross, Mr. Turner, and other friends followed in mourning carriages according to the English custom. The coffin was carried into the beautiful chapel of the Sacred Heart, behind the grand altar, where the Requiem Mass was said over the remains by Father Dunn, and the Vicar of St. Germain des Près, assisted by two priests. There was no music, only the voice of the priest officiating at the Mass for the dead broke the silence of the chapel where the gathering of sad faces was dimly revealed in the light of the candles on the altar and round the black draped bier.

A wave of memory swept over me that bore back to me the scene of the brilliant dinner at which I met Oscar Wilde for the first time. I could see the white satin cloth strewn with red roses, as I then saw, through my tears, the red roses scattered over

the sombre pall; roses blushing with the beauty of life and fragrant with the sweetness of life, how eloquently they recalled the past. How fitting that those mute and beautiful witnesses should have graced my first and last meeting with Oscar Wilde!

\* \* \* \* \*

It is only ten years at the moment of writing this memoir since that sad, grey day of December when the few and faithful friends stood around the simple grave in the little cemetery of Bagneux and watched the curtain of Mother Earth descend on the life-drama of Oscar Wilde. Ten short years—and the world has forgotten the shadow in the light that now shines upon the name of Oscar Wilde. To-day his ashes rest in Père-la-Chaise, among the honoured dead whose names are inscribed on the scroll of France and the hearts of men and women the world over thrill as they read the message of Oscar Wilde's great feminine soul in the pages of "De Profundis."

THE END.



